

EXCLUSIVE

# THE SECRET HISTORY OF WHAT SPLIT THE NFL & THE PATRIOTS APART

BY DON VAN NATTA JR. & SETH WICKERSHAM



## THE TRANSACTION ISSUE

MARCH 2 2015

Dallas Cowboys  
DESIGNATE WR  
**DEZ BRYANT**  
FRANCHISE PLAYER

COWBOYS  
RB **DEMARCO MURRAY**  
decides to play the  
free agent market

Philadelphia Eagles  
TRADE RB  
**LESEAN MCCOY**  
to the Buffalo Bills for  
LB KIKO ALONSO

**DEMARCO MURRAY**

chooses Eagles  
over Cowboys for  
**\$42 million**

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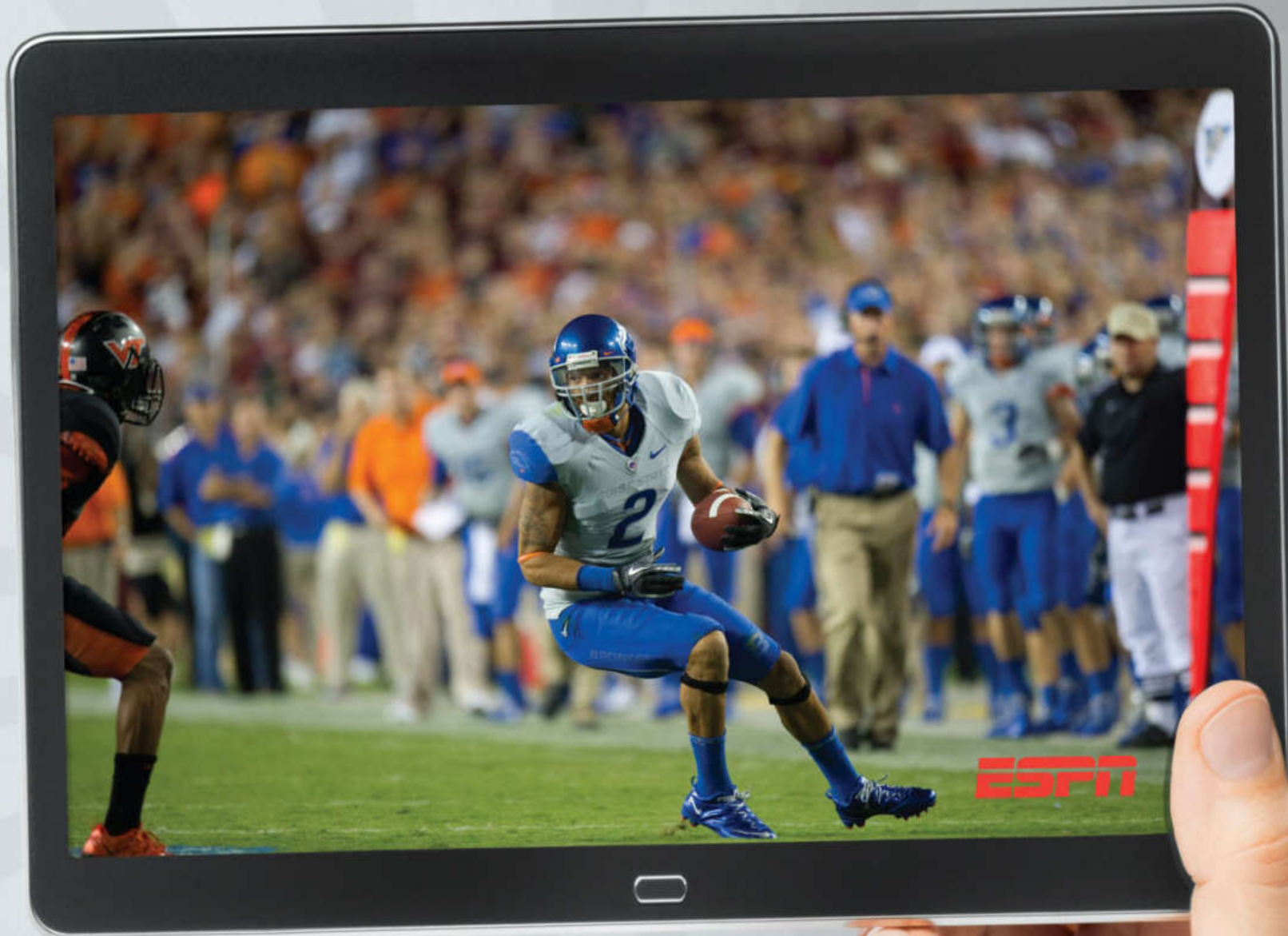
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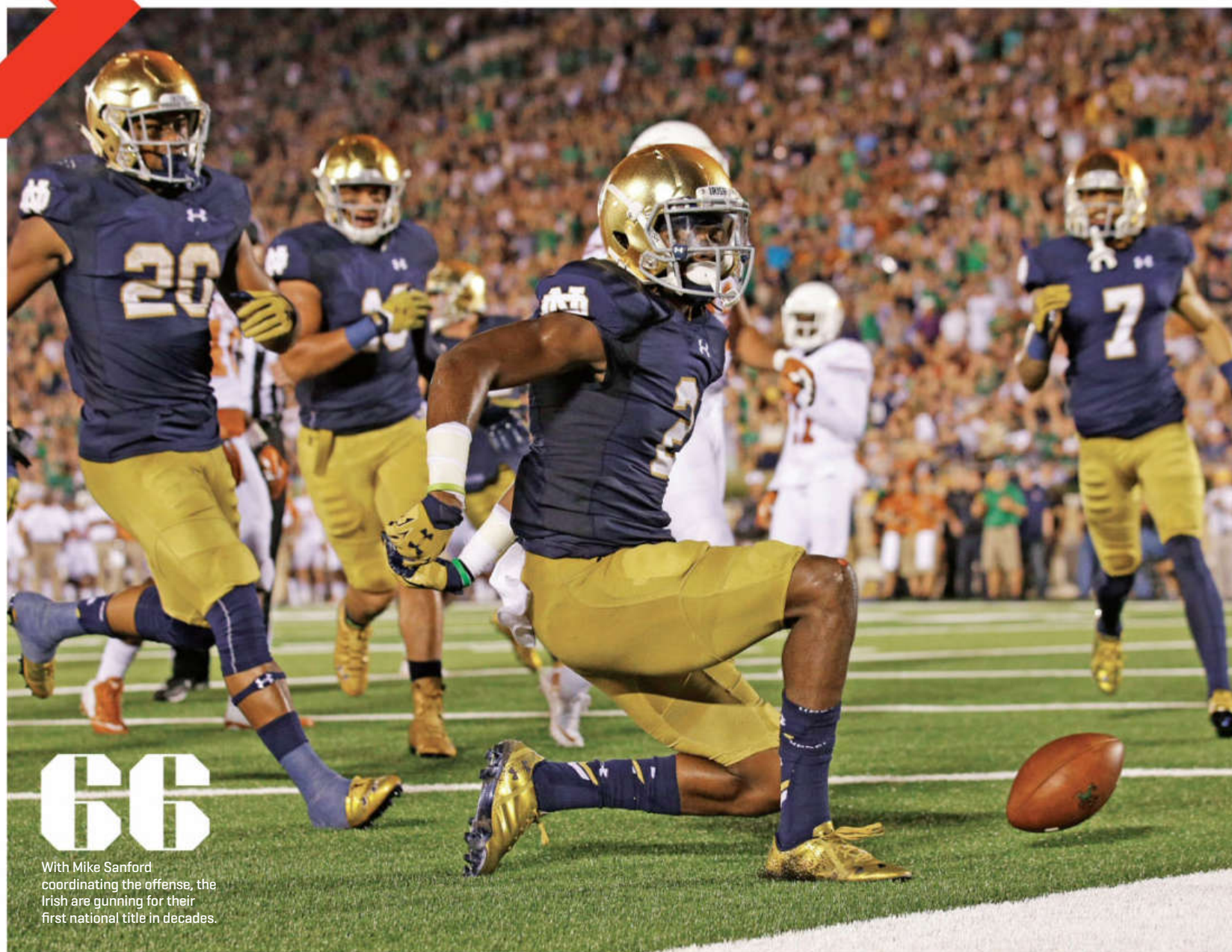
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66  
With Mike Sanford coordinating the offense, the Irish are gunning for their first national title in decades.

## THE TRANSACTIONS ISSUE

### 53 MARCH 2, 2015

ICYMI, it was one momentous day.

### 54 TAG! YOU'RE NOT IT!

How the Cowboys' decision to give Dez Bryant the franchise tag instead of DeMarco Murray altered the balance of power in the NFL. BY DAVID FLEMING

### 64 FRANCHISE OPPORTUNITY

We crunch the numbers to see which franchise tags will actually pay off this NFL season.

### 66 A COACH'S DREAM

Notre Dame's offense gets a wake-up call from new coordinator Mike Sanford. BY WAYNE DREHS

### 78 THE BUSIEST 24 HOURS IN BASEBALL

The Padres made 30 moves in one day. It seemed like a good idea at the time. BY DAN SZYMBORSKI

### 80 DEAR MINNESOTA WILD COACHES ...

A letter [about] home reunited Jordan Leopold with his family ... for now. BY STEVE WULF

## FORWARD

**13 THE PATRIOT WAY** From Spygate to Deflategate, the secret history of what tore New England and the NFL apart.

BY DON VAN NATA JR. AND SETH WICKERSHAM

**42 ZOOM** Johnny Manziel is ready to cash in at the Heisman House yard sale. BY MORTY AIN

**44 JULIO FRANCO WON'T QUIT** Enjoying baseball's longest twilight, the 57-year-old former All-Star takes on a new role: as a manager and player in Japan. BY MICHAEL J. MOONEY

## COLUMNS

### 88 THE TRUTH

What happens to Robert Griffin III now that his hype train has come to a full stop?

BY HOWARD BRYANT





Hibbert's game is one-sided, but in his defense, he's still an upgrade for the Lakers.

## Most Valuable Traded NBA Players

ESPN Insider Kevin Pelton dishes on which ballers will see the biggest bounce with their new teams.

### Roy Hibbert

#### LAKERS CENTER

Despite costing \$17.8 million, Hibbert is still a great value. Barely a year removed from being named runner-up for Defensive POY, the 7-2 Hibbert has a unique ability to defend the rim without fouling. The Lakers allowed 59.6 percent shooting around the basket, 26th in the NBA. Even in a down year with the Pacers last season, Hibbert guarded the rim ferociously, ranking second among all starting centers at 47.2 percent.

### Ersan Ilyasova

#### PISTONS POWER FORWARD

Ilyasova is a career 37 percent 3-point shooter who has been off and on in his seven seasons with the Bucks. He'll make \$7.9 million in 2015-16, a fair salary if he starts and not a terrible one if he comes off the bench. Andre Drummond should help cover for Ilyasova's average defense, and Ilyasova should help spread the floor for Drummond in a way Josh Smith and Greg Monroe never could.

### Ty Lawson

#### ROCKETS POINT GUARD

If Lawson avoids off-court trouble (two DUI arrests this year), he gives Houston the NBA's best penetrating backcourt. Last season Lawson gave Denver 13.9 ppg on his drives, fourth in the NBA; James Harden ranked second with 14.3 ppg on drives. Lawson also gives Houston more firepower when Harden is on the bench and can knock down the 3 (37 percent) when Harden gets overplayed by an aggressive D.

### Lance Stephenson

#### CLIPPERS SHOOTING GUARD

Stephenson carries little long-term risk for LA—he will make \$9 million in 2015-16, with a club option for next season. And at 25, he offers a youthful upside the Clippers haven't had. He started every game he played in 2013-14 in Indiana, and although he slumped in Charlotte last season (net rating of minus-20), he led the NBA in triple-doubles two seasons ago. If all goes well, he could be a Clip for years.



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## Double Coverage

Seth Wickersham on working with fellow senior writer Don Van Natta Jr. in investigating the Patriots and the NFL after Deflategate: “As soon as the NFL handed Tom Brady a tough penalty, Don sensed that it traced back to Spygate. Everyone we talked to—every owner, coach, GM and player—agreed. It was as if Brady was collateral damage in a war between the NFL’s premier organization and the league. So we started calling people and visiting with them as much as we could. Many people are still too scared to talk: Don and I each made about 100 calls that were not returned. But eventually we talked to 90 sources, including many former and current members of the Patriots.”

MORE ON PAGE 13

Van Natta [center] and Wickersham discuss their *Outside the Lines* report with Bob Ley on *SportsCenter*.

### Senior writer Steve Wulf on Jordan Leopold and his family



“At 35, Jordan Leopold is hardly ancient, but in hockey, 12 NHL seasons is an era. And nowadays, he is prized more for his experience as a defenseman than for the offensive prowess he once

had. I took a boat ride up the Mississippi from Minneapolis with Jordan, his wife, Jamie, their four adorable children and two friends. We had dinner at Billy’s Bar & Grill in Anoka, ice cream at Two Scoops—try the banana cream pie—and a lot of laughs. It was one of the nicest assignments in my 44 years as a sports writer. It reminded me of why I keep rolling along like Jordan.” MORE ON PAGE 80

### Photographer Julie Glassberg on shooting Julio Franco



“I was a bit nervous because I was told he doesn’t like media, but his behavior was completely the opposite! He warmly invited us into his home and to follow him around before the games.

He highly respects Japanese culture. We talked a lot about cultural differences—I’m a French photographer who lived in New York for seven years before Japan, and my assistant, Aki, is Japanese. There was a real exchange, and we mutually shared our experiences. No matter how famous of a baseball player he is, he is a very down-to-earth human being.” MORE ON PAGE 44

### Illustrator Matt Lehman on creating the typography for the issue



“NFL free agency is truly frenetic. Things change every minute, and handwriting felt like the only way to convey its temporal aspect. It’s all my handwriting, so what I did was write every name and phrase

in a combination of markers, pens, paintbrushes and Sharpies about 15 to 20 times, and then I would splice my favorite characters all together. I had sheets and sheets of all these words in different styles, and I scanned them into a computer and arranged them. Now that you’ve looked behind the curtain, you’re probably thinking, ‘I’ve got a Sharpie, I can do that—it’s easy!’” MORE ON PAGE 54

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Patriots owner  
Robert Kraft  
and coach  
Bill Belichick

## **The Patriot Way**

From Spygate to Deflategate, the secret history of New England's culture of deception and its split with the league.

BY DON VAN NATTA JR. AND SETH WICKERSHAM  
AN OUTSIDE THE LINES COLLABORATION





His bosses were furious. Roger Goodell knew it. So on April 1, 2008, the NFL commissioner convened an emergency session of the league's spring meeting at The Breakers hotel in Palm Beach, Florida. Attendance was limited to each team's owner and head coach. A palpable anger and frustration had rumbled inside club front offices since the opening Sunday of the 2007 season. During the first half of the Patriots' game against the Jets at Giants Stadium, a 26-year-old Patriots video assistant named Matt Estrella had been caught on the sideline illegally videotaping Jets coaches' defensive signals, beginning the scandal known as Spygate.

NFL owners are always looking over Goodell's shoulder: from left, Jerry Jones (Cowboys) and John Mara (Giants), both of whom sided with the commissioner on Deflategate; Arthur Blank (Falcons), who recently questioned Goodell's role in disciplinary matters; and Jerry Richardson (Panthers), who sits with Blank and Robert Kraft on the committee that determines Goodell's salary.



Behind closed doors, Goodell addressed what he called “the elephant in the room” and, according to sources at the meeting, turned the floor over to Robert Kraft. Then 66, the billionaire Patriots owner stood and apologized for the damage his team had done to the league and the public’s confidence in pro football. Kraft talked about the deep respect he had for his 31 fellow owners and their shared interest in protecting the NFL’s shield. Witnesses would later say Kraft’s remarks were heartfelt, his demeanor chastened. For a moment, he seemed to well up.

Then the Patriots’ coach, Bill Belichick, the cheating program’s mastermind, spoke. He said he had merely misinterpreted a league rule, explaining that he thought it was legal to videotape opposing teams’ signals as long as the material wasn’t used in real time. Few in the room bought it. Belichick said he had made a mistake—“my mistake.”

Now it was Goodell’s turn. The league office lifer, then 49 years old, had been commissioner just 18 months, promoted in part because of Kraft’s support. His audience wanted to know why he had managed his first crisis in a manner at once hasty and strangely secretive. Goodell had imposed a \$500,000 fine on Belichick, a \$250,000 fine on the team and the loss of a first-round draft pick just four days after league security officials had caught the Patriots and before he’d even sent a team of investigators to Foxborough. Those investigators hadn’t come up empty: Inside a room accessible only to Belichick and a few others, they found a library of scouting material containing videotapes of opponents’ signals, with detailed notes matching signals to plays for many teams going back seven seasons. Among them were handwritten diagrams of the defensive signals of the Steelers, including the notes used in the January 2002 AFC championship game won by the Patriots 24–17. Yet almost as quickly as the tapes and notes were found, they were destroyed, on Goodell’s orders: League executives stomped the tapes into pieces and shredded the papers inside a Gillette Stadium conference room.

To many owners and coaches, the expediency of the NFL’s investigation—and the Patriots’ and Goodell’s insistence that no games were tilted by the spying—seemed dubious. It reminded them of something they had seen before from the league and the Patriots: At least two teams had caught New England videotaping their coaches’ signals in 2006, yet the league did nothing. Further, NFL competition committee members had, over the years, fielded numerous allegations that New

“HE TOLD ME, ‘THE LEAGUE DOESN’T NEED THIS. WE’RE ASKING YOU TO COME OUT WITH A COUPLE LINES EXONERATING US.’”

EX-RAMS COACH MIKE MARTZ ON GOODELL’S ASKING HIM TO CLEAR THE PATRIOTS OF CHEATING IN SUPER BOWL XXXVI

England had broken an array of rules. Still nothing. Now the stakes had gotten much higher: Spygate’s unanswered questions and destroyed evidence had managed to seize the attention of a hard-charging U.S. senator, Arlen Specter of Pennsylvania, who was threatening a congressional investigation. This would put everyone—players, coaches, owners and the commissioner—under oath, a prospect that some in that room at The Breakers believed could threaten the foundation of the NFL.

Goodell tried to assuage his bosses: He ordered the destruction of the tapes and notes, he insisted, so they couldn’t be exploited again. Many in the room didn’t believe it. And some would conclude it was as if Goodell, Kraft and Belichick had acted like partners, complicit in trying to sweep the scandal’s details under the rug while the rest of the league was left wondering how much glory the Patriots’ cheating had cost their teams. “Goodell didn’t want anybody to know that his gold franchise had won Super Bowls by cheating,” a senior executive whose team lost to the Patriots in a Super Bowl now says. “If that gets out, that hurts your business.”

Just before he finished speaking, Goodell looked his bosses in the eye and, with dead certainty, said that from then on, cheaters would be dealt with

forcefully. He promised the owners that all 32 teams would be held to the same high standards expected of players. But many owners and coaches concluded he was really sending that message to only one team: the New England Patriots.

**SEVEN YEARS LATER**, Robert Kraft took the podium on the first day of the Patriots’ 2015 training camp and, with a mix of bitterness and sadness, apologized to his team’s fans. “I was wrong to put my faith in the league,” he said. It was a stunning statement from the NFL owner who has been Roger Goodell’s biggest booster and defender.

Goodell had just upheld the four-game suspension he had leveled in early May against quarterback Tom Brady for a new Patriots cheating scandal known as Deflategate. An NFL-commissioned investigation, led by lawyer Ted Wells, after four months had concluded it “was more probable than not” that Brady had been “at least generally aware” that the Patriots’ footballs used in the AFC championship game held this year had been deflated to air pressure levels below what the league allowed. Goodell deemed the Patriots and Brady “guilty of conduct detrimental to the integrity of, and public confidence in, the game of football,” the league’s highest crime, and





Under Belichick, the Patriots became the NFL's dominant franchise, winning Super Bowls after the 2001, 2003 and 2004 seasons. They added a fourth in February.

punished the franchise and its marquee player.

Kraft was convinced Brady was innocent, but he “reluctantly” accepted the punishment, in large part because he was certain Goodell would reduce or eliminate his quarterback’s four-game suspension, the way business is often done in the NFL. Kraft had good reason to believe Goodell might honor a quid pro quo: Throughout Goodell’s nightmare 2014 season of overturned player discipline penalties, bumbling news conferences and a lack of candor, Kraft had publicly stood by the commissioner—even as he privately signaled deep disappointment in Goodell’s performance and fury at the judgment of his top lieutenants, according to sources. After Goodell had upheld Brady’s punishment, mainly on the basis of his

failure to cooperate by destroying his cellphone, Kraft felt burned and betrayed.

Now the owner of the defending Super Bowl champions was publicly ripping the league. To anyone casually watching Deflategate, the civil war pitting Goodell against the Patriots and their star quarterback made no sense. Why were the league’s premier franchise, led by a cherished team owner, and Brady, one of the NFL’s greatest ambassadors, being smeared because a little air might have been let out of some footballs?

But league insiders knew that Deflategate didn’t begin on the eve of the AFC championship game. It began in 2007, with Spygate.

Interviews by *ESPN The Magazine* and *Outside the Lines* with more than 90 league officials,

owners, team executives and coaches, current and former Patriots coaches, staffers and players and reviews of previously undisclosed private notes from key meetings show that Spygate is the centerpiece of a long, secret history between Goodell’s NFL, which declined comment for this story, and Kraft’s Patriots. The diametrically opposed way the inquiries were managed by Goodell—and, more important, perceived by his bosses—reveals much about how and why NFL





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## DRAMA CLUB

New England's cheating saga has been full of key actors, some working for the Patriots, others against them. Here are three on each side who played a unique role in stirring up the plot.

punishment is often dispensed. The widespread perception that Goodell gave the Patriots a break on Spygate, followed by the NFL's stonewalling of a potential congressional investigation into the matter, shaped owners' expectations of what needed to be done by 345 Park Ave. on Deflategate.

It was, one owner says, time for "a makeup call."

**IN AUGUST 2000**, before a Patriots preseason game against the Buccaneers, Jimmy Dee, the head of New England's video department, approached one of his charges, Matt Walsh, with a strange assignment: He wanted Walsh to film the Bucs' offensive and defensive signals, the arm-waving and hand-folding that team coaches use to communicate plays and formations to the men on the field. Walsh was 24 years old, a lifelong New Englander and Patriots fan. He was one of the few employees Belichick retained that season, his first as the team's coach. The practice of decoding signals was universal in football—a single stolen signal can change a game—with advance scouts jotting down notes, then matching the signal to the play. The Patriots created a novel spying system that made the decoding more dependable.

Walsh later told investigators that at the time he didn't know the NFL game operations manual forbade taping signals. He would later recall that even Dee seemed unsure of "what specifically it was that the coaches wanted me to film." Regardless, Walsh complied, standing on the sideline with a camera aimed at Tampa Bay's coaches. After the game, he gave the Beta tape to Dee.

Not coincidentally, the Bucs were also New England's opponent in the regular-season opener. A few days before the game, Walsh told Senate investigators, according to notes of the interview, a backup quarterback named John Friesz was summoned to Belichick's office. Offensive coordinator Charlie Weis and a professorial, quirky man named Ernie Adams were present. Adams was—and still is—a mystery in the Patriots' building, a socially awkward amateur historian of pro football and the Vietnam War who often wore the same red, hole-ridden Patriots sweater from the 1970s. He had a photographic memory, and Brady once said that Adams "knows more about professional football than anyone I ever met."

Adams' title was football research director, the only known person with that title in the NFL. He had made a fortune in the stock market in the 1980s, and the joke was that the only person in the building richer than Adams was Kraft. Belichick and Adams had been friends since 1970,

when they were classmates at Phillips Academy, a New England prep school. Adams introduced himself to Belichick because he recognized his name from a little-known scouting book published in 1962 by his father, Steve Belichick.

When Bill Belichick became coach of the Browns in 1991, he hired Adams to be a consigliere of sorts. Owner Art Modell famously offered \$10,000 to any employee who could tell him what Adams did. In short, in Cleveland and in New England, Adams did whatever he wanted—and whatever Belichick wanted: statistical analysis, scouting and strategy. Years later, Walsh recalled to Senate investigators that Adams told old stories from the Browns about giving a video staffer an NFL Films shirt and assigning him to film the opponents' sideline huddles and grease boards from behind the bench. The shared view of Belichick and Adams, according to many who've worked with them, is this: The league is lazy and incompetent, so why not push every boundary? "You'd want Bill and Ernie doing your taxes," says a former Patriots assistant coach. "They would find all the loopholes, and then when the IRS would close them, they'd find more."

Days before the Tampa Bay game, in Belichick's office, Friesz was told that the Patriots had a tape

of the Bucs' signals. He was instructed to memorize them and, during the game, to watch Bucs defensive coordinator Monte Kiffin and tell Weis the defensive play, which Weis would relay over the radio headset system to quarterback Drew Bledsoe. That Sunday against the Bucs, Walsh later told investigators, the Patriots played more no-huddle than usual, forcing Kiffin to signal in plays quickly, allowing Weis sufficient time to relay the information. Years later, some Patriots coaches would point to the score—a 21-16 Bucs win—as evidence of Spygate's ineffectiveness. But as Walsh later told investigators, Friesz, who did not respond to messages to comment for this story, told Walsh after the game that the Patriots knew 75 percent of the Bucs' defenses before the snap.

Now the Patriots realized they were on to something, a schematic edge that could allow their best minds more control on the field. Taping from the sideline increased efficiency and minimized confusion. And so, as Walsh later told investigators, the system improved, becoming more streamlined—and more secretive. The quarterbacks were cut out of the process. The only people involved were a few coaches, the video staff and, of course, Adams. Belichick, almost five years after being fired by the Browns

### PATRIOTS INSIDERS



#### ERNIE ADAMS

A longtime Belichick confidant, Adams has the mysterious title of Patriots football research director. Turns out, he was the one trying to break down and decode taped signals.



#### MATT ESTRELLA

A former Patriots video assistant, Estrella was caught filming Jets signals during a 2007 game. When confronted by security shortly before halftime, he said he was with Kraft Productions.



#### MATT WALSH

Another former video assistant, Walsh was let go by the team in '03. Amid Spygate investigations, he agreed to speak with Goodell and Arlen Specter, revealing key details to the U.S. senator.

### PATRIOTS FOES



#### ERIC MANGINI

Mangini took the Jets' coaching job in 2006 over the objections of Belichick, his old mentor. Acrimony between the two festered until NFL security busted Estrella.



#### RYAN GRIGSON

Before last season's AFC title game, the Colts' GM forwarded an email to the NFL from a team equipment manager, claiming the Patriots' deflation practices were "well known around the league."



#### ARLEN SPECTER

The late U.S. senator—and longtime Eagles fan—was galled by Spygate. In 2008, he called for an investigation into the NFL and, despite lacking subpoena power, pursued his own inquiry.



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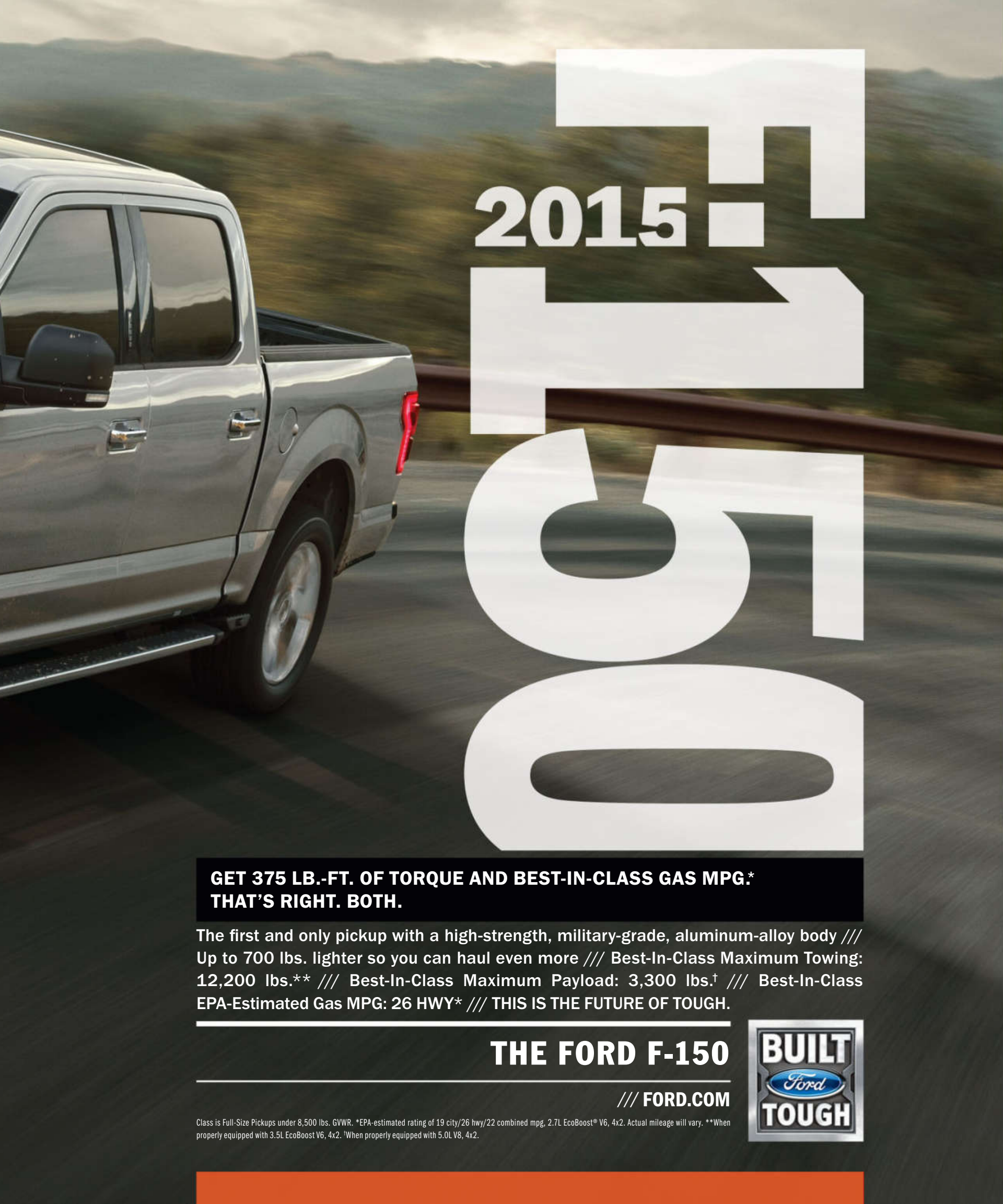
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and fully aware that this was his last best shot as a head coach, placed an innovative system of cheating in the hands of his most trusted friend.

**AS THE PATRIOTS** became a dynasty and Belichick became the first coach to win three Super Bowls in four years, an entire system of covert videotaping was developed and a secret library created. “It got out of control,” a former Patriots assistant coach says. Sources with knowledge of the system say an advance scout would attend the games of upcoming Patriots opponents and assemble a spreadsheet of all the signals and corresponding plays. The scout would give it to Adams, who would spend most of the week in his office with the door closed, matching the notes to the tapes filmed from the sideline. Files were created, organized by opponent and by coach. During games, Walsh later told investigators, the Patriots’ videographers were told to look like media members, to tape over their team logos or turn their sweatshirts inside out, to wear credentials that said “Patriots TV” or “Kraft Productions.” The videographers also were provided with excuses for what to tell NFL security if asked what they were doing: Tell them you’re filming the quarterbacks. Or the kickers. Or footage for a team show.

The cameramen’s assignments differed depending on the opponent. For instance, Walsh told investigators that against Indianapolis he was directed to take close-ups of the Colts’ offensive signals, then of Peyton Manning’s hand signals. Mostly, though, the tapes were of defensive signals. Each video sequence would usually include three shots: the down and distance, the signal and, as an in-house joke, a tight shot of a cheerleader’s top or skirt. The tape was then often edited, sources say, so that Adams’ copy contained only the signals, in rapid fire, one after another. According to investigators, Walsh once asked Adams, “Are the tapes up to standards?”

“You’re doing a good job,” Adams said. “But make sure that you get everyone who’s giving signals, even dummy signals.”

As much as the Patriots tried to keep the circle of those who knew about the taping small, sometimes the team would add recently cut players from upcoming opponents and pay them only to help decipher signals, former Patriots staffers say. In 2005, for instance, the Patriots signed a defensive player from a team they were going to play in the upcoming season. Before that game, the player was led to a room where Adams was waiting. They closed the door, and Adams played a compilation tape that matched the signals to the

“GOODELL  
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plays from the player’s former team and asked how many were accurate. “He had about 50 percent of them right,” the player says now.

During games, Adams sat in the coaches’ box, with binoculars and notes of decoded signals, wearing a headset with a direct audio line to Belichick. Whenever Adams saw an opposing coach’s signal he recognized, he’d say something like, “Watch for the two-deep blitz,” and either that information was relayed to Brady or a play designed specifically to exploit the defense was called. A former Patriots employee who was directly involved in the taping system says “it helped our offense a lot,” especially in divisional games in which there was a short amount of time between the first and second matchups, making it harder for opposing coaches to change signals.

Still, some of the coaches who were with the Patriots during the Spygate years debate the system’s effectiveness. One coach who was in the booth with Adams says it didn’t work because Adams was “horrible” and “never had the calls right.” Another former coach says “Ernie is the guy who you watch football with and he says, ‘It’s going to be a run!’ And it’s a pass. ‘It’s going to be a pass!’ And it’s a run. ‘It’s going to be a run!’ It’s a run. ‘I told you!’”

In fact, many former New England coaches and employees insist that the taping of signals wasn’t even the most effective cheating method the Patriots deployed in that era. Several of them acknowledge that during pregame warm-ups, a low-level Patriots employee would sneak into the visiting locker room and steal the play sheet listing the first 20 or so scripted calls for the opposing team’s offense. (The practice became so notorious that some coaches put out fake play sheets for the Patriots to swipe.) Numerous former employees say the Patriots would have someone rummage through the visiting team hotel for playbooks or scouting reports. Walsh later told investigators that he was once instructed to remove the labels and erase tapes of a Patriots practice because the team had illegally used a player on injured reserve. At Gillette Stadium, the scrambling and jamming of the opponents’ coach-to-quarterback radio line—“small s---” that many teams do, according to a former Pats assistant coach—occurred so often that one team asked a league official to sit in the coaches’ box during the game and wait for it to happen. Sure enough, on a key third down, the headset went out.

But the truth is, only one man truly knows how much Spygate, or any other suspect method, affected games: Belichick.



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He had spent his entire adult life in professional football, trying to master a game no coach could control. Since he entered the league in 1975, Belichick had witnessed the dark side of each decade's dynasties, airbrushed away by time and lore. Football's tradition of cheating through espionage goes back to its earliest days, pioneered by legends such as George Halas. And so when it came to certain tactics—especially recording signals of a coach “in front of 80,000 people,” Belichick would later say, a practice that he claimed other teams did and that former Cowboys coach Jimmy Johnson once confessed to trying himself—Belichick considered them fair game. He could call an offensive or defensive play whenever he wanted, based on a suggestion from Adams or not, and never have to explain why to anyone. “Remember, so much of this is the head coach's prerogative,” says a former Patriots assistant coach. (Belichick, Adams and Dee declined to comment for this story through the Patriots, who made several officials available to talk but not others.)

A former member of the NFL competition committee says the committee spent much of 2001 to 2006 “discussing ways in which the Patriots cheated,” even if nothing could be proved. It reached a level of paranoia in which conspiracy theories ran wild and nothing—the notion of bugging locker rooms or of Brady having a second frequency in his helmet to help decipher the defense—was out of the realm of possibility. There were regular rumors that the Patriots had taped the Rams' walk-through practice before Super Bowl XXXVI in February 2002, one of the greatest upsets in NFL history, a game won by the Patriots 20-17 on a last-second Adam Vinatieri field goal. The rumors and speculation reached a fever pitch in 2006. Before the season, a rule was proposed to allow radio communications to one defensive player on the field, as was already allowed for quarterbacks. If it had passed, defensive signals would have been unnecessary. But it failed. In 2007, the proposal failed once again, this time by two votes, with Belichick voting against it. (The rule change passed in 2008 after Spygate broke, with Belichick voting for it.) The allegations against the Patriots prompted NFL executive vice president of football operations Ray Anderson to send a letter to all 32 team owners, general managers and head coaches on Sept. 6, 2006, reminding them that “videotaping of any type, including but not limited to taping of an opponent's offensive or defensive signals, is prohibited from the sidelines.”

But the Patriots kept doing it. In November

2006, Packers security officials caught Matt Estrella shooting unauthorized footage at Lambeau Field. When asked what he was doing, according to notes from the Senate investigation of Spygate that had not previously been disclosed, Estrella said he was with Kraft Productions and was taping panoramic shots of the stadium. He was removed by Packers security. That same year, according to former Colts GM Bill Polian, who served for years on the competition committee and is now an analyst for ESPN, several teams complained that the Patriots had videotaped signals of their coaches. And so the Patriots—and the rest of the NFL—were warned again, in writing, before the 2007 season, sources say.

Looking back on it, several former Patriots coaches insist that spying helped them most against less sophisticated teams—the Dolphins and Bills chief among them—whose coaches didn't bother changing their signals. Even when they had the perfect play teed up, sometimes the system would fail, owing to human error. Several opposing coaches now say they wish they had messed with Belichick's head the way he had messed with theirs. You want to tape signals? Fine. We'll have three guys signaling plays and disguise it so much that Ernie Adams has to waste an entire day trying to decode them, then change them all when we play.

At the time, though, only one head coach actually did: Eric Mangini.

**ON SEPT. 9, 2007**, in the first game of the season, Estrella aimed a video camera at the Jets' sideline, unaware he was the target of a sting operation. Mangini was entering his second year as the Jets' coach. Belichick had practically invented Mangini: In January 1995, he saw potential in a 24-year-old Browns PR intern and moved the fellow Wesleyan alum into football operations. Belichick hired Mangini to be his assistant when he coached under head coach Bill Parcells for the Jets in the late '90s and soon became a father figure of sorts to Mangini, whose father had died when he was young. Then, in 2000, Belichick brought Mangini to New England as defensive backs coach, promoting him to defensive coordinator in 2005.

In 2006, Jets GM Mike Tannenbaum, one of Mangini's best friends and another Belichick charge, wanted to hire the 34-year-old Mangini as head coach. Mangini took the job over the objections of Belichick, who hated the Jets so much that he barely mentioned his tenure there in his official Patriots bio. Belichick revoked Mangini's key card access and didn't allow him to

## PATRIOTS' RESPONSE

When contacted by ESPN for this story, several team officials were made available for interviews; others, including Bill Belichick, were not. The following statement was issued by team spokesman Stacey James on Sept. 8.

“The New England Patriots have never filmed or recorded another team's practice or walk-through. The first time we ever heard of such an accusation came in 2008, the day before Super Bowl XLII, when the *Boston Herald* reported an allegation from a disgruntled former employee. That report created a media firestorm that extended globally and was discussed incessantly for months. It took four months before that newspaper retracted its story and offered the team a front and back page apology for the damage done. Clearly, the damage has been irreparable. As recently as last month, over seven years after the retraction and apology was issued, ESPN issued the following apology to the Patriots for continuing to perpetuate the myth: ‘On two occasions in recent weeks, *SportsCenter* incorrectly cited a 2002 report regarding the New England Patriots and Super Bowl XXXVI. That story was found to be false and should not have been part of our reporting. We apologize to the Patriots organization.’

“This type of reporting over the past seven years has led to additional unfounded, unwarranted and, quite frankly, unbelievable allegations by former players, coaches and executives. None of which have ever been substantiated, but many of which continue to be propagated. The New England Patriots are led by an owner whose well-documented efforts on leaguewide initiatives—from TV contracts to preventing a work stoppage—have earned him the reputation as one of the best in the NFL. For the past 16 years, the Patriots have been led by one of the league's all-time greatest coaches and one of its all-time greatest quarterbacks. It is disappointing that some choose to believe in myths, conjecture and rumors rather than giving credit for the team's successes to Coach Belichick, his staff and the players for their hard work, attention to detail, methodical weekly preparation, diligence and overall performance.”



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pack up his office. The tension was raised later that year, when the Patriots accused the Jets of tampering and the Jets countered with an accusation that the Patriots had circumvented the salary cap. Mangini, who is currently the defensive coordinator for the 49ers and who declined to comment for this story, knew the Patriots inside and out and would tweak his former boss by using his tricks against him, like having a quarterback punt on third and long at midfield, one of Belichick's favorite moves.

Then there was the videotaping. Mangini knew the Patriots did it, so he would have three Jets coaches signal in plays: One coach's signal would alert the players to which coach was actually signaling in the play. Still, Mangini saw it as a sign of disrespect that Belichick taped their signals—"He's pissing in my face," he told a confidant—and wanted it to end. Before the 2007 opener, sources say, he warned various Patriots staffers, "We know you do this. Don't do it in our house." Tannenbaum, who declined comment, told team security to remove any unauthorized cameramen on the field.

During the first half, Jets security monitored Estrella, who held a camera and wore a polo shirt with a taped-over Patriots logo under a red media vest that said NFL PHOTOGRAPHER 138. With the backing of Jets owner Woody Johnson and Tannenbaum, Jets security alerted NFL security, a step Mangini later acknowledged publicly that he never wanted. Shortly before halftime, security encircled and then confronted Estrella. He said he was with Kraft Productions. They took him into a small room off the stadium's tunnel, confiscated his camera and tape and made him wait. He was sweating. Someone gave Estrella water, and he was shaking so severely that he spilled it. "He was s---ting a brick," a source says.

On Monday morning, Estrella's camera and the spy tape were at NFL headquarters on Park Avenue.

**CONSIDERING HOW THE** NFL currently conducts its investigations or reviews of its investigations—outsourcing the legwork and allowing it to take months to complete, making the findings public and almost always losing if the inevitable appeal is heard by an independent arbitrator—it's striking that the Spygate inquiry lasted only a little over a week and that Goodell's findings stuck. The day after the game, Sept. 10, the Jets sent a letter to the Patriots asking them to preserve any evidence because they had sent an official grievance about the Patriots' spying to the NFL, says Robyn Glaser,



Kraft (right) was once among Goodell's biggest backers. The two were all smiles before a Patriots game in Green Bay last season.

vice president of the Kraft Group and club counsel of the Patriots. Kraft told Belichick to tell the truth and cooperate with the investigation, and the coach waived the opportunity to have a hearing. On Sept. 12, Goodell spoke on the phone with Belichick for 30 minutes, sources say. Belichick explained that he had misinterpreted a rule, which the commissioner did not believe to be true, sources say, and that he had been engaged in the practice of taping signals for "some time." The coach explained that "at the most, he might gain a little intelligence," Goodell would later recall, according to notes. Belichick didn't volunteer the total number of games at which the Patriots had recorded signals, sources say, and the commissioner didn't ask. "Goodell didn't want to know how many games were taped," another source with firsthand knowledge of the investigation says, "and Belichick didn't want to tell him."

The next day, the league announced its historic punishment against the Patriots, including an NFL maximum fine of Belichick. Goodell and league executives hoped Spygate would be over.

But instead it became an obsession around the league and with many fans. When Estrella's confiscated tape was leaked to Fox's Jay Glazer a week after Estrella was caught, the blowback was so great that the league dispatched three of its executives—general counsel Jeff Pash, Anderson and VP of football operations Ron Hill—to Foxborough on Sept. 18.

What happened next has never been made public: The league officials interviewed Belichick, Adams and Dee, says Glaser, the Patriots' club counsel. Once again, nobody asked how many games had been recorded or attempted to determine whether a game was ever swayed by the spying, sources say. The Patriots staffers insisted that the spying had a limited impact on games. Then the Patriots told the league officials they possessed eight tapes containing game

footage, along with a half-inch-thick stack of notes of signals and other scouting information belonging to Adams, Glaser says. The league officials watched portions of the tapes. Goodell was contacted, and he ordered the tapes and notes to be destroyed, but the Patriots didn't want any of it to leave the building, arguing that some of it was obtained legally and thus was proprietary. So in a stadium conference room, Pash and the other NFL executives stomped the videotapes into small pieces and fed Adams' notes into a shredder, Glaser says. She recalls picking up the shards of plastic from the smashed Beta tapes off the floor and throwing them away.

The Patriots turned over what they turned over, and the NFL accepted it. Sources with knowledge of the investigation insist that the Patriots were "borderline noncompliant." And a former high-level Patriots employee agrees, saying, "The way the Patriots tried to approach it, they tried to cover up everything," although he refused to specify how. Glaser adamantly denies that assertion, saying all the Patriots' evidence of stolen signals was turned over to the league that day. On Sept. 20, Glaser says, the team signed a certification letter promising the league that the only evidence of the videotaping of illegal signals had been destroyed two days earlier and that no other tapes or notes of stolen signals were in the team's possession. The letter does not detail the games that were recorded or itemize the notes that were shredded.

And that was it. The inquiry was over, with only Belichick and Adams knowing the true scope of the taping. (After the season, Belichick would acknowledge that the Patriots taped a "significant





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number” of games, and according to documents and sources, they recorded signals in at least 40 games during the Spygate era.) The quick resolution mollified some owners and executives, who say they admired the speed—and limited transparency—in which Goodell carried out the investigation. “This is the way things should be done ... the way they were done under Pete Rozelle and Paul Tagliabue,” a former executive now says. “Keep the dirty laundry in the family.”

But other owners, coaches, team executives and players were outraged by how little the league investigated what the Patriots’ cheating had accomplished in games. The NFL refused to volunteer information—teams that had been videotaped were not officially notified by the league office, sources say—and some executives were told that the tapes were burned in a dumpster, not crushed into pieces in a conference room. The NFL’s explanation of why they were destroyed—“so that our clubs would know they no longer exist and cannot be used by anyone,” the league said at the time—only made it worse for those who were critical. “I wish the evidence had not been destroyed because at least we would know what had been done,” Polian says. “Lack of specificity just leads to speculation, and that serves no one’s purpose—the Patriots’ included.”

The view around much of the league was that Goodell had done a major favor for Kraft, one of his closest confidants who had extended critical support when he became the commissioner the previous summer. Kraft is a member of the NFL’s three-person compensation committee, which each year determines Goodell’s salary and bonuses—\$35 million in 2013 and nearly \$44.2 million in 2012. “It felt like this enormous break was given to the Patriots,” a former exec says. They were also angry at Belichick—partly, some admit, out of jealousy for his success but also because of the widespread rumors that he was always pushing the envelope. The narrative that paralleled the Patriots’ rise—a team mostly void of superstars, built not to blow out opponents but to win the game’s handful of decisive plays—only increased rivals’ suspicions. After all, the Patriots had won three Super Bowls by a total of nine points. Although Belichick admitted to Kraft that the taping had helped them only 1 percent of the time (“then you’re a real schmuck,” Kraft told him), the spying very well could have affected a game, opponents say. “Why would they go to such great lengths for so long to do it and hide it if it didn’t work?” a longtime former executive says. “It made no sense.”

**“I WISH THE EVIDENCE HAD NOT BEEN DESTROYED BECAUSE AT LEAST WE WOULD KNOW WHAT HAD BEEN DONE.”**

**FORMER COLTS GM BILL POLIAN**

The Patriots’ primary victims saw Spygate, and other videotaping rumors, as confirmation that they had been cheated out of a Super Bowl—even though they lacked proof. The Panthers now believe that their practices had been taped by the Patriots before Super Bowl XXXVIII in 2004. “Our players came in after that first half and said it was like [the Patriots] were in our huddle,” a Panthers source says. During halftime—New England led 14-10—Carolina’s offensive coordinator, Dan Henning, changed game plans because of worries the Patriots had too close a read on Carolina’s schemes. And in the second half, the Panthers moved the ball at will before losing 32-29 on a last-second field goal. “Do I have any tape to prove they cheated?” this source says. “No. But I’m convinced they did it.”

No player was more resolute that Spygate had affected games than Hines Ward, the Steelers’ All-Pro wide receiver. Ward told reporters that Patriots inside information about Steelers playcalling helped New England upset Pittsburgh 24-17 in the January 2002 AFC championship game. “Oh, they knew,” Ward, now an NBC analyst who didn’t return messages for this story, said after Spygate broke. “They were calling our stuff out. They knew a lot of our calls. There’s no question some of their players were calling out some of our stuff.”

Some of the Steelers’ defensive coaches remain convinced that a deep touchdown pass from Brady to Deion Branch in the January 2005 AFC championship game, which the Patriots won 41-27, came from stolen signals because Pittsburgh hadn’t changed its signals all year, sources say, and the two teams had played a game in the regular season that Walsh told investigators he believes was taped. “They knew the signals, so they knew when it went in what the coverage was and how to attack it,” says a former Steelers coach. “I’ve had a couple of guys on my teams from New England, and they’ve told me those things.”

When Spygate broke, some of the Eagles now believed they had an answer for a question that had vexed them since they lost to the Patriots 24-21 in Super Bowl XXXIX: How did New England seem completely prepared for the rarely used dime defense the Eagles deployed in the second quarter, scoring touchdowns on three of four drives? The Eagles suspected that either practices were filmed or a playbook was stolen. “To this day, some believe that we were robbed by the Patriots’ not playing by the rules ... and knowing our game plan,” a former Eagles football operations staffer says.





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## CRIME AND LESS PUNISHMENT

Tom Brady's vacated four-game suspension hardly marks the first time Goodell's authority has been overruled. Lately, judges and arbitrators have regularly reversed his suspensions.

### 2012 BOUNTYGATE

Goodell asked former commissioner Paul Tagliabue to hear the appeals of four Saints, including Jonathan Vilma, who'd been suspended a full season for being a ringleader of the team's alleged bounty program. Tagliabue, as arbitrator, vacated the suspensions, saying there was no precedent for such harsh punishments.

### 2014 RAY RICE

Goodell first suspended Rice for two games, but after video of Rice's assault leaked, Goodell suspended him indefinitely, saying the tape provided new evidence. But a former federal judge ruled in arbitration that Rice had told Goodell the full story from the beginning and could not be suspended again.

### 2015 ADRIAN PETERSON

In February, federal Judge David Doty overturned an arbitration decision upholding Peterson's near-season-long suspension—tied to his child abuse charges—slated to last until at least April 2015. Doty found that the suspension was based on the NFL's updated personal conduct policy, which did not exist at the time of the incident in question.

### 2015 GREG HARDY

The former Panther and current Cowboy was suspended 10 games, a ruling that stemmed from a domestic violence conviction (later dismissed). But the NFL-appointed arbitrator ruled against Goodell, saying the high number of games couldn't be supported by even the league's revised conduct policy. Hardy's suspension was reduced to four games.

It didn't matter that the Patriots went 18–1 in 2007. Or that they would average more wins a season after Spygate than before. Or that Belichick would come to be universally recognized as his generation's greatest coach. Or that many with the Patriots remain mystified at the notion that a historic penalty was somehow perceived to be lenient. The Patriots were forever branded as cheaters—an asterisk, in the view of many fans, forever affixed to their wins. The NFL was all too aware of the damage baseball had suffered because of the steroid scandal, its biggest stars and most cherished records tarnished. After Spygate made headlines, rumors that had existed for years around the NFL that the Patriots had cheated in the Super Bowl that propelled their run, against the Rams, were beginning to boil to the surface, threatening everything. “I don't think fans really want to know this—they just want to watch football,” the Panthers source says. “But if you tell them the games aren't on the level, they'll care. Boy, will they care.”

**IN JANUARY 2008**, in the middle of the playoffs, Arlen Specter, the senior United States senator from Pennsylvania, bumped into Carl Hulse, a *New York Times* congressional reporter, on Capitol Hill. Hulse asked Specter which team he thought would win the Super Bowl, which would eventually feature the Giants and the undefeated Patriots.

“It all depends,” Specter jokingly replied, “if there is cheating involved.”

Specter told Hulse he was troubled by the NFL's lightning-quick investigation and by the destruction of the tapes and the notes. Twice during the previous few months, he had written letters to Goodell seeking additional information about Spygate. Twice the commissioner had not replied.

That disclosure led to a story in the *Times*, putting Spygate, and all of its unanswered questions, front and center two days before the Super Bowl. Only then did Goodell reply to Specter. Unsatisfied, Specter told the *Times*, “The American people are entitled to be sure about the integrity of the game.” Even more intriguing to Specter, there were fresh reports that Matt Walsh, working as an assistant golf pro in Hawaii at the time, had not been interviewed by the NFL the previous September. The reports suggested that Walsh had additional information—and possessed videotapes—of the Patriots' spying.

Specter was at the time the ranking Republican on the Senate Judiciary Committee. A former federal prosecutor, he had cut his investigative teeth as a lawyer for the Warren Commission,

and two decades earlier he had gone after the NFL for its antitrust exemption. Specter was now 77 years old and undergoing chemotherapy to treat non-Hodgkin's lymphoma, the complications from which would claim his life in October 2012. One of his biggest political patrons was Comcast, the Philadelphia-based cable TV giant that was at the time locked in a dispute with the league over fees for carrying the NFL Network, a connection the senator vehemently denied had motivated his interest in Spygate.

Instead, Specter said he was motivated by curiosity about Goodell's own statements on the matter, according to hundreds of previously

undisclosed papers belonging to Specter and interviews with former aides and others who spoke with him at the time. At his pre-Super Bowl news conference on Feb. 1, 2008, Goodell insisted the Patriots' taping was “quite limited” and “not something done on a widespread basis,” contradicting what Belichick had told him. Goodell was asked how many tapes the league had reviewed, and destroyed, the previous September. “I believe there were six tapes,” the commissioner replied, “and I believe some were from the preseason in 2007, and the rest were primarily in the late 2006 season.”

The Patriots had spied far more often than that, of course, but Specter didn't know it at the time. All he knew was that he didn't buy Goodell's explanation for destroying the tapes—that he didn't want to create an uneven playing field. “You couldn't sell that in kindergarten,” Specter said.

**SPECTER DIDN'T HAVE** subpoena power, so he played hardball with the league, threatening to pursue legislation that would cancel its antitrust exemption. And so at 3 p.m. on Wednesday, Feb. 13, 2008—10 days after the Giants upset the previously undefeated Patriots 17–14 in the Super Bowl—Goodell and Pash arrived at Specter's office, Room 711 of the Senate Hart Building on Capitol Hill. During the 1-hour, 40-minute interview, the new details of which are revealed in Specter's papers and in interviews with key aides, Goodell was supremely confident, “cool as a cucumber,” stuck to his talking points and apologized for nothing, recalls a senior aide to Specter. Pash, who, according to a source, later that spring would offer to resign over how the Spygate investigation was handled, spent the interview “sweating, squirming.”

Repeating what he had proclaimed publicly, Goodell assured Specter the destroyed tapes went back only to the 2006 season. But then he confessed something new: that the Patriots began their taping operation in 2000 and the destroyed notes were for games as early as 2002, “overwhelmingly for AFC East rivals,” contradicting an assertion he made just two weeks earlier in public. The commissioner told Specter that among the destroyed notes were the Patriots' detailed diagrams of the Steelers' defensive signals from several games, including the January 2002 AFC championship game—in which Ward later alleged that the Patriots called “our stuff out.”

When Specter pressed Goodell on the speed of the investigation and his decision to destroy evidence, Goodell became “defensive” and had “the





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overtone of something to hide,” according to notes taken by Danny Fisher, a counsel on Specter’s Judiciary Committee staff and the lead investigator for the Spygate inquiry. “No valid reason to destroy,” Specter wrote in his own notes.

Goodell assured Specter that “most teams do not believe there is an advantage” from the taping, a comment contradicted by the outraged public and private remarks of many players and coaches, then and now. “Even if Belichick figured out the signals,” Goodell insisted, “there is not sufficient time to call in the play.”

The senator seethed that Goodell seemed completely uninterested in whether a single game had been compromised. He asked Goodell whether the spying might have tipped the Patriots’ Super Bowl win against the senator’s favorite team, the Eagles. Goodell said that he had spoken with Eagles owner Jeffrey Lurie and then-head coach Andy Reid and that “both said the outcome of the [February] 2005 Super Bowl was legitimate,” an assertion contradicted by the private feelings of many senior members of the team.

Then Specter moved to the most damning allegation still unresolved at the time: that the Patriots had taped the Rams’ pre-Super Bowl walk-through.

The commissioner acknowledged that he first “got wind” of the widespread rumor the previous September, something he had not said publicly. But Goodell told Specter the NFL had found no hard evidence that New England had taped the walk-through, saying the league interviewed the video staffs of the Patriots and Rams. “Each said no taping went on, and if it had, the Rams’ video staff surely would have reported it,” the notes show.

After the interview, Specter was even more convinced that Goodell had neglected to look hard enough for the truth. And so he decided to investigate the things the NFL had chosen to ignore. “The league’s explanations just didn’t add up, and the senator’s prosecutorial instincts wouldn’t allow him to let it go,” Fisher says.

After the meeting with Specter, Goodell told reporters he had no regrets about his decision to destroy the evidence.

“I think it was the right thing to do,” he said. “I have nothing to hide.”

**WITHIN DAYS, SPECTER** concluded that the NFL, the Patriots and senior league officials were very much hiding from him. His calls and emails to 25 people from the Patriots, members of the competition committee and other teams went unanswered; lawyers from white-shoe Manhattan

law firms, including one representing the Patriots’ videographers, declined to make their clients available for questioning. (The senator was able to reach one former Patriots scout, who told him to “keep digging.”) In his 2012 book, *Life Among the Cannibals*, Specter wrote that a powerful friend—he wouldn’t name the person—told him that if he “laid off the Patriots,” there could be a lot of money for him in Palm Beach. Specter told the friend, “I couldn’t care less.”

So Specter turned to the one person who appeared willing to talk: Matt Walsh.

Since the Patriots had lost to the Giants in the Super Bowl, Walsh had emerged as a reluctant whistleblower in media stories. He had not been interviewed by the NFL and had kept eight previously undisclosed spying tapes and other material from his days in New England; he was fired in 2003 for performance issues. Walsh hinted that the cheating was more widespread than anyone knew—and, perhaps, that he possessed proof that the Patriots had taped the Rams’ walk-through.

On May 13, 2008, after signing an indemnification agreement with the NFL, Walsh and his lawyer met for 3 hours and 15 minutes at league headquarters with Goodell, Pash, outside NFL lawyer Gregg Levy, Patriots lawyer Dan Goldberg and Milt Ahlerich, the league’s director of security. A source in the meeting says that Ahlerich asked the majority of the questions; Goodell was mostly silent. Afterward, Goodell told reporters that the information provided by Walsh was “consistent with what we disciplined the Patriots for last fall” and that he “was not aware” of a taped Rams walk-through and “does not know of anybody who says there is a tape.” Hoping to end the matter forever, Goodell added that unless some new piece of information emerged, the league’s interest in Spygate was closed.

That afternoon, Walsh and his lawyer, Michael N. Levy, flew to Washington and met with Specter and his staff for more than three hours. Walsh, who along with Levy declined to comment for this story, covered many topics, among them that the public didn’t know the great lengths that video assistants were told to use to cover up the videotaping of signals. Belichick had insisted that it was done openly, with nothing to hide.

“Were you surprised that Belichick said he had misinterpreted the rules?” Specter asked.

“Yes,” Walsh said. “I was surprised that Belichick would think that because of the culture of sneakiness.”

Walsh told Specter the taping continued in the

years after he left the team, by Steve Scarnecchia, his successor as video assistant, whom Walsh claimed to see taping opposing coaches’ signals at Gillette Stadium from 2003 to 2005. Specter asked whether he had told Goodell about it. “No,” Walsh said. “Goodell didn’t ask me about that.”

Then Specter turned to the alleged videotaping of the Rams’ walk-through. Walsh confessed that after the Patriots’ team picture, he and at least three other team videographers lingered around the Louisiana Superdome, setting up cameras for the game. Suddenly, the Rams arrived and started their walk-through. The three videographers, in full Patriots apparel, hung around, on the field and in the stands, for 30 minutes. Nobody said anything. Walsh said he observed star Rams running back Marshall Faulk line up in an unusual position: as a kickoff returner. That night, Walsh reported what he had seen to Patriots assistant coach Brian Daboll, who asked an array of questions about the Rams’ formations. Walsh said that Daboll, who declined through the Patriots to comment for this story, drew a series of diagrams—an account Daboll later denied to league investigators.

Faulk had returned only one kickoff in his career before the Super Bowl. Sure enough, in the second quarter, he lined up deep. The Patriots were ready: Vinatieri kicked it into a corner, leading Faulk out of bounds after gaining one yard.

During the walk-through, the Rams had also practiced some of their newly designed red zone plays. When they ran the same plays late in the Super Bowl’s fourth quarter, the Patriots’ defense was in position on nearly every down. On one new play, quarterback Kurt Warner rolled to his right and turned to throw to Faulk in the flat, where three Patriots defenders were waiting. On the sideline, Rams coach Mike Martz was stunned. He was famous for his imaginative, unpredictable plays, and now it was as if the Patriots knew what was coming on plays that had never been run before. The Patriots’ game plan had called for a defender to hit Faulk on every down, as a means of eliminating him, but one coach who worked with an assistant on that 2001 Patriots team says the ex-Pats assistant coach once bragged that New England knew exactly what the Rams would call in the red zone. “He’d say, ‘A little birdie told us,’” the coach says now.

In the meeting in Specter’s office, the senator asked Walsh: “Were there any live electronics during the walk-through?”

“It’s certainly possible,” Walsh said. “But I have no evidence.”

In the coming years, the Patriots would become



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baffled by those persistent rumors, which were mostly fueled by a pre-Super Bowl 2008 *Boston Herald* report—later retracted—that a team videographer had taped it. Some media outlets—including ESPN—have inadvertently repeated it as fact. According to Patriots spokesman Stacey James, “The New England Patriots have never filmed or recorded another team’s practice or walk-through. ... Clearly the damage has been irreparable. ... It is disappointing that some choose to believe in myths, conjecture and rumors rather than give credit to Coach Belichick, his staff and the players.”

After the Walsh interview, Specter again accused Goodell of conducting a “fatally flawed” investigation designed not to determine whether the taping affected a game. He complained to aides that the NFL had never publicly identified the “more than 50 people” in 11 days whom Goodell had claimed the league had interviewed. And Fisher says that Specter felt “stonewalled” by everyone connected to the NFL. So Specter called for an independent investigation of Spygate, modeled after the inquiry by former Sen. George Mitchell of the rampant use of steroids in major league baseball, or a transparent investigation led by a committee of Congress. Asked whether he was willing to say the NFL covered up, Specter hesitated. “No,” he said. “There was just an enormous amount of haste.”

But in his handwritten notes the day before, beneath Matt Walsh’s name, Specter jotted the phrase, “Cover-up.”

**ON THE EXACT** day that Specter called for an investigation, Goodell left a voice mail message on Mike Martz’s cellphone. The Super Bowl against the Patriots had derailed Martz’s career as much as it made Belichick’s. Martz’s offense, dubbed the Greatest Show on Turf in 1999, was never the same, and in 2006, Martz was fired as the Rams’ coach. After bouncing around the league, he was then the 49ers’ offensive coordinator. Like a number of former Rams—especially Faulk and Warner, who now both work for the NFL Network—Martz was deeply suspicious of whether the Patriots had videotaped the walk-through or his team’s practices before the Super Bowl, even though he believes that the Rams’ three turnovers were the main factors in the defeat.

Martz says now that he returned Goodell’s call from the 49ers’ practice field. During a five-minute conversation, Martz recalls that the commissioner sounded panicked about Specter’s calls for a wider investigation. Martz also recalls that Goodell asked him to write a statement,



The Patriots keyed on Marshall Faulk in Super Bowl XXXVI; some Rams are sure New England was helped by knowing their plays.

saying that he was satisfied with the NFL’s Spygate investigation and was certain the Patriots had not cheated and asking everyone to move on—like leaders of the Steelers and Eagles had done.

“He told me, ‘The league doesn’t need this. We’re asking you to come out with a couple lines exonerating us and saying we did our due diligence,’” says Martz, now 64 and out of coaching, during a July interview at his summer cabin in the Idaho mountains.

A congressional inquiry that would put league officials under oath had to be avoided, Martz recalls Goodell telling him. “If it ever got to an investigation, it would be terrible for the league,” Goodell said.

Martz says he still had more questions, but he agreed that a congressional investigation “could kill the league.” So in the end, Martz got in line. He wrote the statement that evening, and it was released the next day, reading in part that he was “very confident there was no impropriety” and that it was “time to put this behind us.”

Shown a copy of his statement this past July, Martz was stunned to read several sentences about Walsh that he says he’s certain he did not write. “It shocked me,” he says. “It appears embellished quite a bit—some lines I know I didn’t write. Who changed it? I don’t know.”

Since Spygate broke, Martz says he has continued to hear things about the run-up to that Super Bowl. Goodell “told me to take him at his word,” he says. “It was hard to swallow because I always felt something happened, but I didn’t know what it was and I couldn’t prove it anyway.

Even to this day, I think something happened.”

No matter how angry owners and coaches were over Goodell’s handling of Spygate, they were unified in their view that a congressional investigation posed a threat to the game itself. On June 5, 2008, Specter delivered a lengthy speech on the Senate floor, blasting the NFL’s investigation, destruction of evidence and lack of transparency. “The overwhelming evidence flatly contradicts Commissioner Goodell’s assertion that there was little or no effect on the outcome of the game,” he said. Once more, Specter called for “an objective, thorough, transparent investigation” of Spygate. But he knew then, his aides now say, that such an investigation would never happen.

The NFL had won. Barely.

**GOODELL MOVED ON** immediately—the same day as Specter’s floor statement, actually—introducing a mandatory “Policy on Integrity of the Game & Enforcement of Competitive Rules” to be signed by owners, team presidents, general managers and head coaches after each season, swearing they had “complied with all League competitive policies.” The first thick paragraph detailing prohibited acts reads like a litany of Spygate-era acts and accusations, including “unauthorized videotaping on game day or of practices, meetings or other organized team activities” and the barring of “unauthorized entry into locker rooms, coaches’ booths, meeting rooms or other private areas.” At the same time, the league also relaxed its investigative standard of proof to the “preponderance of the evidence,” making findings of guilt





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easier, and required the signees to cooperate with NFL investigations.

But Spygate's damage went far beyond rule changes and new disciplinary procedures. Belichick's reputation was so tarnished that he worried Spygate would come up during his Hall of Fame consideration, people who know him say. Goodell was now suspect in many of his bosses' eyes after making the first of several conduct decisions that would ultimately draw unwanted criticism. And Kraft no longer owned what many considered to be the model sports franchise. Kraft would later say he knew that Spygate wasn't "personal," that Goodell had done "what he thought was right for the league ... even if his judgment isn't pure."

And yet, despite Spygate, Kraft's influence in the league grew, with Goodell and with business matters. During labor negotiations in 2011, Kraft emerged as the reasoned, respected voice among those who helped bridge the wide gulf between the players' union and the owners. As chairman of the league's broadcast committee, Kraft took the lead to hammer out long-term, record-shattering agreements with NBC, Fox, CBS and ESPN. To some executives, Kraft was considered the "assistant commissioner," a nickname that a source says has always embarrassed him because it's not how he wants to be perceived. He was always as quick to praise and defend Goodell in public as he was during closed-door meetings.

Last autumn, though, Goodell suffered through his worst season as commissioner, one in which the publicity about the NFL and Goodell's leadership was almost uniformly negative for months. His mishandling of the Ray Rice domestic violence discipline caused commentators, including some at ESPN, to call for his firing. Some owners felt Goodell's handling was cause for his dismissal or, at the very least, his contract not being renewed beyond March 2019. One owner said, "We're paying this guy \$45 million for this s---?"

Publicly, Kraft continued his role as Goodell's chief supporter, saying the commissioner had been "excellent" on Rice. But sources say Kraft became deeply concerned last fall by the performance of Goodell. A close friend who saw him that October recalls Kraft saying, "Roger's been very disappointing in the way he has handled this. And I'm not alone in feeling like that." Kraft was also furious at the league's executives, from Pash to its public relations staff, and said they had failed to help Goodell. "Roger's people don't have a f---ing clue as to what they are doing," Kraft told his friend.

Another team's senior executive who frequently talks with owners says the owners last autumn were "really split. There are people who feel [Goodell] has made them a lot of money and they shouldn't do anything. Others think, 'He has embarrassed the league and if we had a better commissioner, we'd be making more money.'" All the negative headlines certainly haven't affected the league's bottom line—total revenues and TV ratings continue to shatter records. The NFL's annual revenue, racing toward \$15 billion, is the most important metric that Goodell's bosses use to judge his performance, several owners and executives say.

Shortly before last Thanksgiving, as the league awaited a former federal judge's decision on the appropriateness of the indefinite suspension Goodell had given to Rice, Kraft attended a fundraising dinner and, reflecting a sense among some owners, confided to a friend, "Roger is on very thin ice." At the same time, according to another source, Kraft was still rallying support for the commissioner despite his increasing disappointments. Asked when the owners would likely discuss Goodell's performance, Kraft replied, "We're going to wait until after the Super Bowl."

And then, on the eve of the AFC championship game, as Kraft hosted Goodell at a dinner party at his Brookline, Massachusetts, estate, a league official got a tip from the Colts about the Patriots' use of deflated footballs.

**EVEN THE LANGUAGE** of the tip seemed to echo suspicions shaped by the Spygate era. Ryan Grigson, the Colts' general manager, forwarded to the league office an emailed accusation made by Colts equipment manager Sean Sullivan: "It is well known around the league that after the Patriots game balls are checked by the officials and brought out for game usage, the ball boys for the Patriots will let out some air with a ball needle because their quarterback likes a smaller football so he can grip it better."

From the beginning, though, Goodell managed Deflategate in the opposite way he tried to dispose of Spygate. He announced a lengthy investigation and, in solidarity with many owners, outsourced it to Wells, whose law firm had defended the NFL during the mammoth concussions litigation. In an inquiry lasting four months and costing at least \$5 million, according to sources, Ted Wells and his team conducted 66 interviews with Patriots staffers and league officials. Wells, who declined to comment, also plumbed cellphone records and text messages.

A 243-page report was made public that applied the league's evidentiary standards—relaxed after Spygate—against Brady, while Belichick, who had professed no knowledge of the air pressure of his team's footballs and said in January that the Patriots "try to do everything right," was absolved of any wrongdoing. Finally, Goodell and Troy Vincent, executive vice president of football operations, waited until the conclusion of the investigation before awarding punishment, rather than the other way around. Another legacy of Spygate—consequences for failing to cooperate with a league investigation—was used against the Patriots and, ultimately, Brady. Goodell upheld Brady's four-game suspension because the quarterback had asked an assistant to dispose of his cellphone before his March interview with Wells. That, in fact, was the only notable similarity between the two investigations: the order to destroy evidence.

Sources say the Patriots privately viewed it all as a witch hunt, endorsed by owners resentful of New England's success and a commissioner who deferred too much authority to Pash and Vincent. Patriots executives were furious that a Jan. 19 letter they received from NFL executive David Gardi contained two critical facts—details the league used as the basis for its investigation—that were later proved false: that during a surprise inspection at halftime of the AFC championship game one of New England's footballs tested far below the legal weight limit, at 10.1 psi, and that all of the Colts' balls were inflated to the permitted range. A source close to Brady views the targeting of him as resentment and retribution by opposing teams: "Tom has won 77 percent of his games—in a league that is designed for parity, that's a no-no."

But to the many owners who saw the Patriots as longtime cheaters, it really didn't matter that Goodell appeared eager, perhaps overeager, to show the rest of the NFL that he had learned the lessons of Spygate. One team owner acknowledges that for years there was a "jealous ... hater" relationship among many owners with Kraft, the residue of Spygate. "It's not surprising that there's a makeup call," one team owner says. Another longtime executive says a number of owners wanted Goodell to "go hard on this one."

Kraft felt it firsthand in May. He had publicly threatened legal action against the NFL but then privately decided against it. Not long after arriving in San Francisco for the league's spring meeting, Kraft sensed that many owners wouldn't have stood with him anyway, sources say. They backed Goodell.



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With his four-game suspension vacated, Brady got to play in the Patriots' Week 1 win against the Steelers.

"The one that stunned him the most—the one that really rocked him—was John Mara," says a close friend of Kraft's. The Giants' president and CEO is a quiet, deeply respected owner whom Goodell often leans on for counsel. Mara had signaled to Kraft, "It's not there. We're not there with you on this. Something has to happen. The commissioner has to do his job." Mara insists that this account "is not true," but the next day at the spring meeting, Kraft announced he'd grudgingly accept the league's punishment against his team, proclaiming it was best for the league. After Kraft's announcement that he would accept the penalties, a number of owners, including Mara, thanked him for doing so, sources say.

Over the summer, Jerry Jones of the Cowboys and Stephen Ross of the Dolphins publicly backed Goodell's Deflategate investigation despite all of its embarrassments—from the flawed science to the questions of its independence to the inaccurate leaks reported by ESPN and other media outlets. Many other owners and executives, who feared alienating Kraft, did so privately, insisting that Goodell's willingness to take on the Patriots has helped him emerge in a stronger position with most of his billionaire bosses, managing the expectations of his 32 constituents with the savvy of a U.S. senator's son.

"Roger did the right thing—at last," one owner said after Goodell upheld Brady's punishment. "He looks tough—and that's good."

"Pleased," said another longtime owner.

"About time," an executive close to another owner said. "Overdue."

"The world has never seen anyone as good as Roger Goodell as a political maneuverer. If he were in Congress, he'd be majority [leader]," one owner says.

**THE MAKEUP CALL** carried public fallout. In his 40-page decision on Sept. 3 that vacated Brady's suspension over Deflategate, Judge Richard M. Berman rebuked Goodell and the NFL, saying that the commissioner had "dispensed his own brand of industrial justice." Columnists, analysts and even some NFL players immediately pounced, racing to proclaim that Goodell finally had suffered a crushing, perhaps legacy-defining defeat. From the Saints' Bountygate scandal through Deflategate, Goodell is 0-5 on appeals of his high-profile disciplinary decisions.

For his part, Goodell denied that Deflategate was connected to Spygate: "I am not aware of any connection between the Spygate procedures and these procedures [in Deflategate] ...," he said on ESPN's *Mike & Mike* radio show on Sept. 8. "There is no connection in my mind between these two incidents."

During the same appearance, Goodell said he would consider reducing his role in the disciplinary process, a proposal raised by influential team owner Arthur Blank of the Falcons. "I am open to changing my role," Goodell said. "It's become extremely time-consuming, and I have to be focused

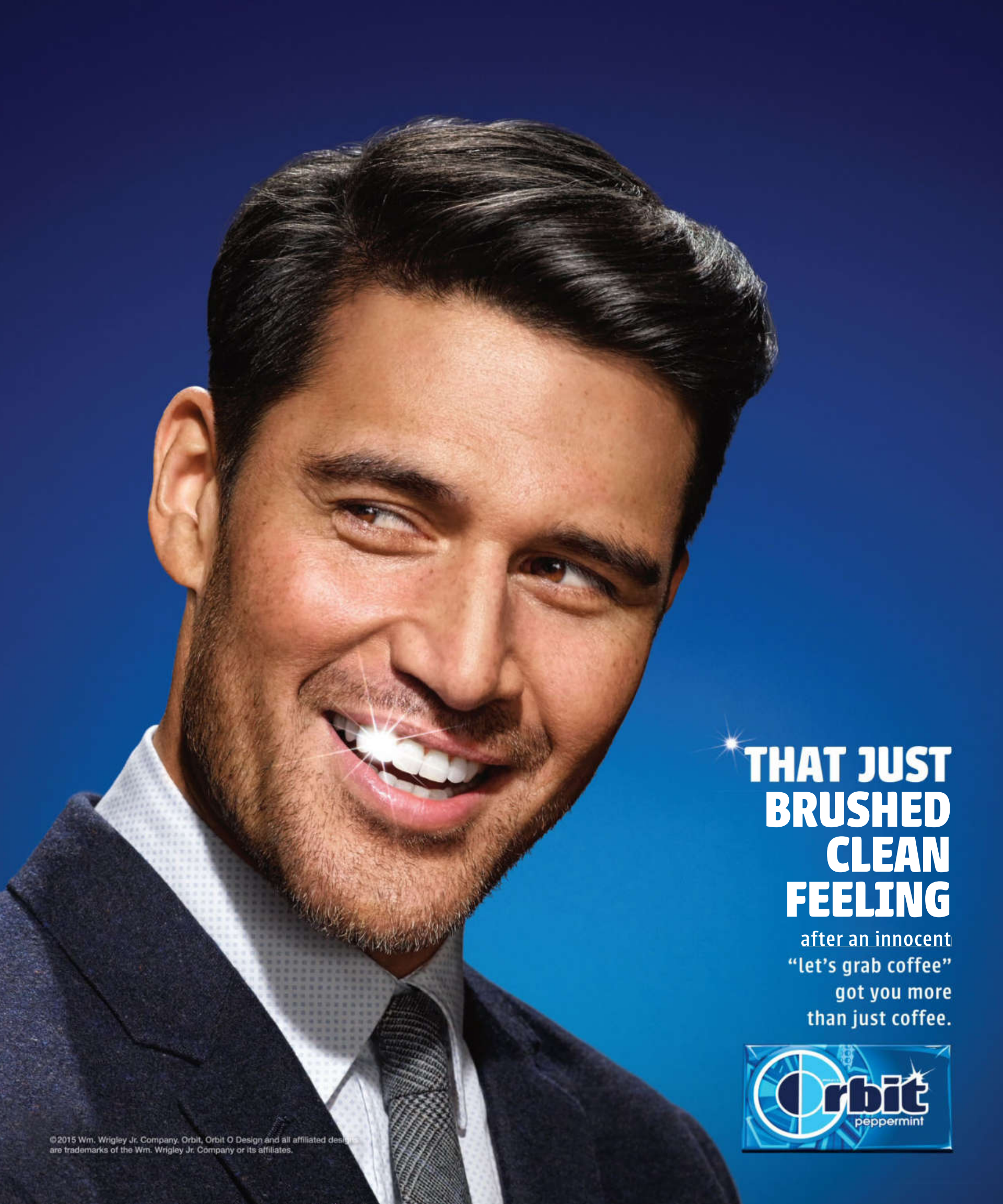
on other issues. I've discussed this with owners."

Owners are still weighing the fallout of Deflategate. Brady's court victory was narrow; Berman ruled only on whether the league had followed the collective bargaining agreement, not on the quarterback's guilt or innocence. It didn't matter to them that the Patriots had accepted the league's punishment in May. For the second time in less than a decade, in the eyes of some owners and executives, Goodell had the Patriots in his hands and let them go. The league lost, again. The Patriots won, again.

And so it was that in mid-June, while Deflategate's appeal rolled on, Kraft hosted a party at his Brookline estate for his players and coaching staff. Before dinner, the owner promised "rich" and "sweet" desserts that were, of course, the Super Bowl champions' rings. On one side of the ring, the recipient's name is engraved in white gold, along with the years of the Patriots' Super Bowl titles: 2001, 2003, 2004 and, now, 2014.

A photograph snapped at the party went viral: There was a smiling Tom Brady, in a designer suit, showing off all four of his rings, a pair on each hand. On the middle finger of his right hand, Brady flashed the new ring, the gaudiest of the four, glittering with 205 diamonds—and no asterisks. ■





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\*The 2016 Nissan TITAN is not yet available for purchase. Expected availability in December 2015. Pre-production model shown; see actual production vehicle when available for final details on features. See *Nissan Towing Guide* and Owner's Manual for proper use. Cargo and load capacity limited by weight and distribution. Always secure all cargo. Heavy loading of the vehicle with cargo, especially on the roof, will affect the handling and stability of the vehicle. Always wear your seat belt, and please don't drink and drive. ©2015 Nissan North America, Inc.





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HEISMAN



ZOOM

**WHO**  
JOHNNY  
MANZIEL

**WHAT**  
HEISMAN HOUSE  
AD SHOOT

**WHEN**  
JULY 1, 9:30 A.M. PT

**WHERE**  
PASADENA, CALIF.

Johnny Manziel looks like he's barely breaking a sweat, but he's actually working hard at the fictional Heisman House. The ad campaign [co-sponsored by Nissan and ESPN] promotes the chance for fans to cast their own vote for the trophy by highlighting the shenanigans that happen when 14 Heisman winners "live" together. This year housemates host a garage sale and make Manziel man the driveway, a decided comedown for Johnny Football: Last year he boogied with female students to Lil Jon during Roger Staubach's house party. The shift in tone wasn't just for the cameras. "Manziel took a back seat this year," says photographer Scott Clarke. "I think he was trying to show people that he's respectable." Yes, the house is fictional, but the camaraderie isn't scripted. "There's an amazing kinship with them all," says Brett Becks, co-creative director of the campaign. "The young guys strictly talk about the season, while the older guys talk golf." —MORTY AIN

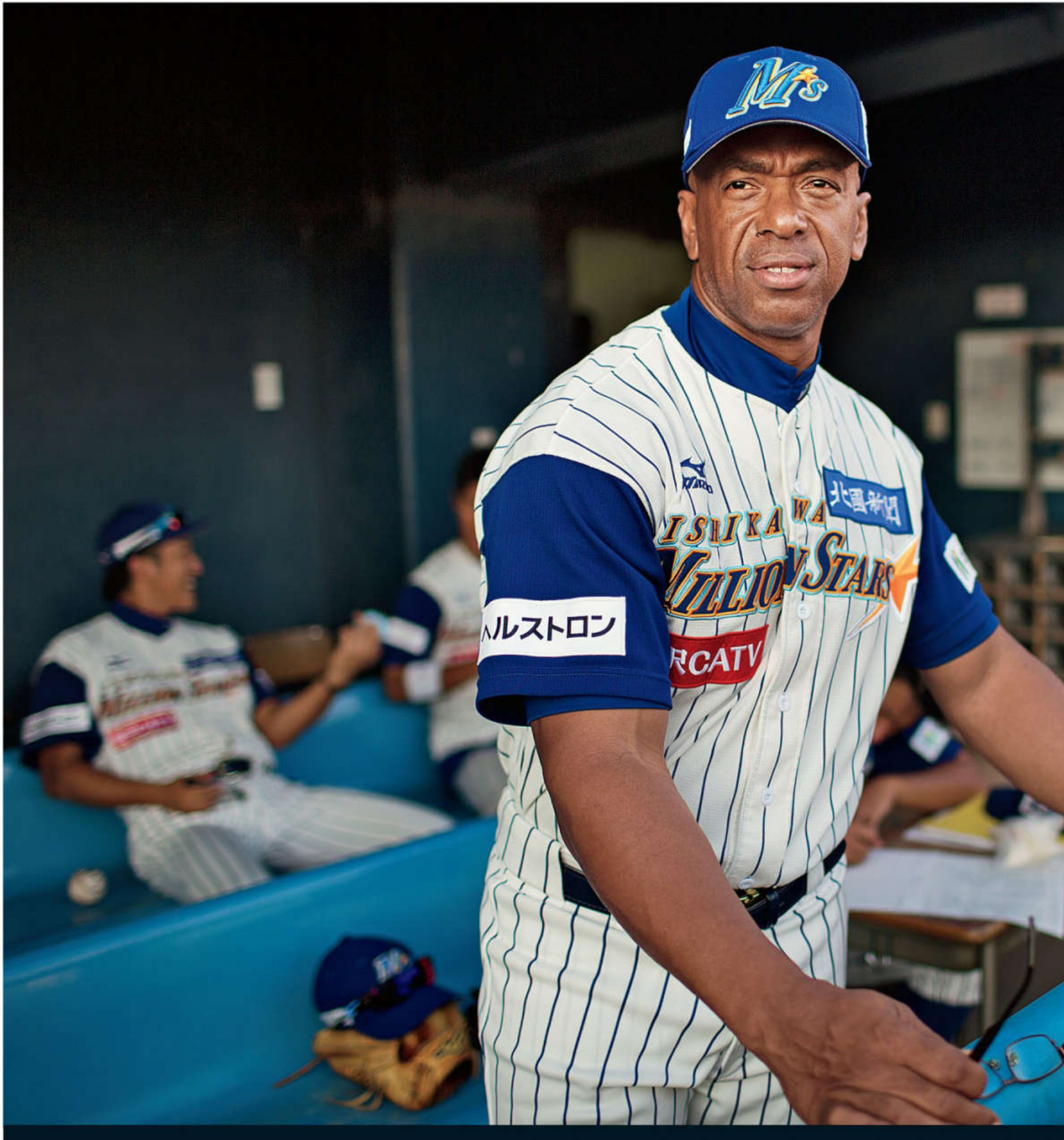
PHOTOGRAPH BY  
SCOTT CLARKE/ESPN IMAGES















# Julio Franco Won't Quit

At 57, the former All-Star is writing his third act as a manager—and player!—in Japan. And he says he's just getting warmed up for a return to the big leagues.

BY MICHAEL J. MOONEY



Julio Franco has a translator standing a few feet away, but at the moment, he doesn't need him, yelling to his players in Japanese. The three hitters taking batting practice in the grassless infield seem hesitant, so Franco switches to English and lowers the volume. His translator, a 25-year-old former salesman named Keita Sugano, jumps into action.

"Relax your knees and set your feet like this," Franco calls out to one batter. As Sugano translates, he imitates the relaxed stance with his legs. Franco pushes up his chin before reminding the players, "Get your head up!" He wants them to hit without fear.

The next batter steps to the plate and, on his first swing, knocks the ball over the center-field wall.

"See!" Franco says, clapping and nodding.

After most of the players have batted, Franco, who last played major league baseball in 2007, when he was 49 years old, picks up the heaviest bat available—an ounce lighter than the 36 he preferred in the U.S. He steps to the plate and signals to the



**1982 THE ROOKIE**

At 23 years old, Franco begins his major league career. First stop: Phillies.

**1984 BATTER UP**

In Cleveland, Franco leads the AL with 658 at-bats and hits .286.

coach on the mound that he'd like a few pitches. The players around him stop what they're doing and turn to watch. Cicadas buzz in the trees just past the outfield fence.

Franco lifts his bat, and there it is! That stance. It is perhaps the strangest batting stance in the history of baseball. His toes are pointed inward. His butt is way out—as is his back elbow, which he keeps higher than his ear. His fingers are an overlapping tangle on the bat, and the bat itself is up over his head, like he's pointing the tip at the pitcher's face. From a distance, he looks like a knock-kneed pelican curiously leaning over potential prey. Up close, he looks more like a coiled snake.

Franco's chest and arms are massive—maybe the biggest they've ever been. He's thicker in the middle than he used to be, a little more barrel-shaped, but when he holds a bat, when he wiggles into that stance, he's unmistakable. It's the same stance he had when he debuted with the Phillies in April 1982 during the Reagan administration. The same one he had 25 years later, when he became the oldest position player in major league history to have 100 plate appearances. (He holds MLB records for oldest player to hit a grand slam, oldest player to steal two bases in a game and perhaps for being the only player to hit a home run with a grandchild in attendance.) He played against at least one pitcher who faced Ted Williams. He's still married to that stance.

Now 57, Franco is in his first season as the manager of the Ishikawa Million Stars, in a Japanese independent league. The team is based in Kanazawa, a two-and-a-half-hour bullet-train ride from Tokyo. Being here means almost no money. It means almost no Americans. It means long practices in the sun, long bus rides through the countryside and playing before smaller crowds than he did as a teenager. But for Franco, it also means a chance to play a role in the game he's loved since he first picked up a bat 48 years ago as a kid in the Dominican Republic.

He shifts his shoulders and stops, taking the first pitch without swinging. On the second pitch, he uncoils, smacking a line drive over second base. Several players clap. The next one he hits to the wall in left-center, what would have easily been a double in his prime—the days when he was winning a batting title with the Rangers. There are more claps. A few gasps.

"Look at that," Franco says, as if he expected it all along, as if hitting a baseball were as natural as blinking.

He believes that being on this field is his



Thirty-three years after his MLB debut, Franco has taken his game to the Japanese city of Kanazawa. Despite minuscule crowds and little pay, he's soaking up his time on the field.



#### 1991 LONE STAR

Franco finishes his third season in Texas with the AL's best batting average [.341].

#### 2004 BASES LOADED

At 45, Franco becomes the oldest player to post an OPS [.818] above league average.

#### 2008 SOUTHBOUND

Franco plays his 31st season of professional ball, this one in the Mexican League.

#### 2015 MR. BASEBALL

Franco heads to Japan for his managing debut with the Ishikawa Million Stars.



# “FOR \$7 MILLION, I’LL PLAY AGAINST MARTIANS ON MARS AND USE A GREEN BALL.”

JULIO FRANCO

destiny. It's God's plan. He tells his players that his body comes from God. That they too should believe in his God, and in Jesus.

When asked what he and the players think when Franco says these things, Sugano, who perfected his English as an exchange student in Alaska, pauses for a moment. “He is,” he says, “very different from the people here.”

Still, just like his players, Franco is trying to work his way up, first to the big leagues here, then, if he's successful enough, to America.

And he's not just coaching. He's playing too.

**FRANCO SITS IN** the living room of his apartment, which is small by American standards and huge by Japanese. He's in the corner, wearing glasses, with his knees pulled to his chest and his ankles crossed. The boy who once worked in a Dominican factory just to play for the company's baseball team has become something of a baseball sage, dispensing wisdom and philosophy. It's a far cry from his early days in the game.

Franco used to scream at scorers and pretend he didn't speak English to reporters. When he played with the Indians in the late 1980s, he had a reputation for arguing and sometimes going missing. He brought a gun into the clubhouse, and at least once, when he was in Texas, he brought his pet tiger. “Jana was only 3 months old,” he says. “Not much larger than an average

house cat.” At one point, he also owned a wolf.

In the early 1990s—he struggles to recall the exact date—he says he was born again and started living according to the Bible. He believes that his stance and quick hands come from God, that God has rewarded him with great endurance.

At the height of his career, Franco won five Silver Slugger awards. He was an All-Star three years in a row, and in 1990, he was the MVP of the All-Star Game. (He still brags about how heavy the trophy was.) He ended up with more than 2,500 major league hits, but if you add up all of his professional playing days, he's closing in on 4,000. He was a star player in his prime, but when they celebrate him outside the stadium in Kanazawa, it's for his longevity. A T-shirt for sale lists the clubs Franco has played on, starting with the Phillies in 1982 and including the Rangers, White Sox, Brewers, Devil Rays, Mets, Mexico City Tigres, Fort Worth Cats, Puebla Parrots and Samsung Lions (in Korea), plus two stints each with the Indians, Braves and Chiba Lotte Marines (in Japan). His first stint in Japan was in 1995, after the MLB season was cut short by the strike. He says he was originally offered \$7 million to play for two years. “For \$7 million,” he says, “I'll play against Martians on Mars and use a green ball.”

In 2007, he tried retirement, filling his time with golf and scuba diving. But he missed the game. He missed the competition on the field, the



camaraderie of a team, the chance to astonish people with a bat in his hands. So he played first for a few Mexican teams, then last year in a few games for the Fort Worth Cats, in something called United League Baseball. Then he got a call about coming to Japan, a chance to manage. He was eager for an opportunity, so it didn't take anything close to \$7 million to get him to accept. "Almost no money," Franco says. (One report says he's making \$60,000.)

Franco made the move and prepared for his first managing opportunity, not expecting to play much when the season started. But injuries forced him onto the field. He played in 10 of the team's first 14 games, hitting .333 with four RBIs and six runs scored. The 57-year-old baseball player. He says he can keep playing because he's willing to put himself out there, to get hurt, to look silly. He also has some tricks in his cabinet.

Franco likes to tell his players that "a man's body is his greatest investment." (He also tells them, "When I started playing professional baseball, most of you were still in your fathers' balls.") He played with Rafael Palmeiro, Jose Canseco and a few other known performance-enhancing-drug users but swears he never took any kind of steroid or growth hormone. "Anybody who ever did that got caught," he says. "Their names came out."

Back in his apartment in Japan, Franco tours the kitchen, dishing out holistic health tips and paging through four binders that he keeps on a shelf, each full of recipes he's seen online and printed. He takes assorted supplements from around the world. He insists they're all natural and within the rules of the game. He doesn't eat meat. He doesn't drink soda or sports drinks or cold water. He likes it warm, with lemon.

"He's a very simple man," says his wife, Yaris, who speaks Spanish but not English or Japanese. She attends all of her husband's home games, watching from the top of the stadium and waiting in the hall when he's done.

The Francos cook most meals at home, rarely going a day without brewing tea that Franco blends himself. He doesn't go to doctors. "Not if they don't practice TCM," he says, referring to traditional Chinese medicine. "Like baseball, I like to pull the best from everywhere." He uses herbs, mushrooms and teas from Peru, India, China and Thailand. He's particularly fond of matcha, a powdered green tea popular in Japan.

Franco goes on for some time about how only people who work in corporations and in cities die of cancer. The men working in rice fields and

along the mountainsides in the country, he reasons, never die of cancer. "They die at 100 of old age," he says. He flips through some more of his binders and shares more of his theories, at times sounding more like a kooky uncle than a wise guru. "People in America are too caught up in their routines," he says. "I live in a cocoon."

Suddenly, Franco stands up. He has something else he wants to show. He walks across the room and lifts a large glass jar full of an amber-colored liquid. At the bottom of the jar are the bodies of two dead vipers, their fangs intact, their coiled, scaly bodies glowing beneath the light of a nearby window. He puts the jar on his glass coffee table and lifts a metal ladle. It's hard to tell what he's

**Franco started with the Phillies in 1982, hit his prime with the Rangers in the '90s and celebrated his 48th birthday with the Mets in 2006.**



doing, which is how he likes it. He smiles and asks: "Are you brave?"

**A FEW HOURS** after batting practice, the Million Stars prepare to face off against the Fukui Miracle Elephants. Franco walks out to meet the opposing manager at home plate. They remove their hats, bow and shake hands before returning to their respective dugouts. A mix of American and Japanese pop music plays over the stadium PA system. The Million Stars have a losing record heading into the game, and fans don't come in droves. A few dozen people settle into seats while a Little League team hits balls off a tee along the first-base line before the first inning. One boy does his best Julio Franco impression, tying himself into a knot and eventually hitting nothing but the side of the tee.

Each team's cheer squad—a group of enthusiastic fans with scarves, shirts and drums—takes its spot in the stands. The Miracle Elephants' section



## RESPECT YOUR ELDERS

More than just a journeyman, Julio Franco excelled at the game well into his 40s, even hitting milestones with a grandchild in the stands.

sings a different song for each of its batters, sometimes working in nicknames and rhymes. Two trumpeters play walk-up songs for the Million Stars—"When You Wish Upon a Star" and the original *Mickey Mouse Club* theme song.

Franco isn't playing tonight. He stands watch at the edge of the dugout, his arms crossed in what looks like deep contemplation. He's pitching Ryan Searle, a 26-year-old Australian-born player who spent seven seasons in the Cubs organization. Another Australian, catcher Jack Daru, is behind the plate. Some days, Daru stays in the clubhouse for hours after games, with Franco pitching him baseballs and advice. They also work out together. The team's most well-known Japanese player is 23-year-old knuckleballer Eri Yoshida. When she was 16, Yoshida became the first woman drafted by a Japanese men's professional league. Tonight she welcomes the crowd before the game but spends the rest of the evening in the dugout.

The Million Stars manage two early runs, but Searle, who leads the league in strikeouts this season, never gets an easy inning. The Miracle Elephants start sacrifice-bunting in the first. Before the night is over, Searle will give up at least five infield hits. Franco claps and cheers when things go well and shakes his head, stern and stoic, when they don't. The argumentative young player of the past is noticeably absent.

In the third, a Miracle Elephants bunt results in a runner safe at first, and Franco walks over to the umpire, who looks to be about 18. Sugano, the translator, follows a few steps behind. Franco shakes his head and wags his finger the way American managers so often do, while Sugano politely tries to explain to the umpire that Franco has a difference of opinion on this call. After a minute of strained cultural exchanges, Franco returns to his perch at the top of the dugout.

The game stretches on for a painful four and a half hours, and the Million Stars lose 5-2, an ugly loss full of amateur errors. At one point, Searle is heard screaming and punching a door in the clubhouse. Franco is calm. After 48 years of this, he knows there's always tomorrow.

The next day the team has an afternoon game against the Fukushima Hopes. Following batting practice, Franco pulls aside his bench coach and they sit face-to-face in plastic chairs behind the dugout. With Sugano seated between them, it looks like a small prayer circle.

"We need to push it," Franco tells the coach. "We need to go from first to third. We need to go from second home."

If the team had more power, Franco explains, it

might be different. But the Million Stars don't. They have speed. So he wants to use that, and he needs everyone to buy in to his approach. "I want to take the best from the Japanese way and the best from the American way," he says.

Sugano says that for the most part, the players are receptive to the changes. "They know he brings something they don't have," he says. "They know he's had great success. They value that and want to learn from him."

Still, despite the calm exterior, Franco's patience is waning. After such a miserable loss, he can't stand by and watch anymore. He wants to play. So today, although he's recovering from a hamstring injury, he puts himself in the lineup as the designated hitter. He bats fourth.

In the first inning, Franco steps up to the plate with two outs and a runner on first. He tips his cap and bows to the catcher. He tips his cap and bows to the umpire. He turns, loosens his knees, sticks out his butt and winds himself up.

Trumpets blare and drums beat. Another youth baseball team—the Sun Boys—cheers from just above the dugout.

The first pitch is a ball, high and outside. The second is a strike. The third comes down, and Franco turns on it. One second he's coiled. The next his body has shifted, the bat has connected and the ball is rocketing by the shortstop.

He hustles, as much as a 57-year-old DH can hustle, around first. The runner on first stops at second. Franco waves his hands, exasperated. The next batter hits a double, and this time, Franco gets the signal to stop at third. He shakes his head. He's stranded. Luckily, by the end of the game, it doesn't matter. Franco goes 2-for-4, and the Million Stars win 3-0.

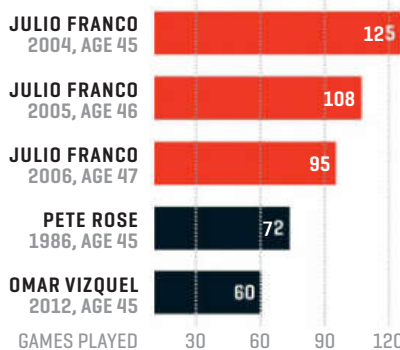
After the game, Franco says his body feels good. "No stiffness," he says. "No aches." He bows to the field and takes off for a run in the afternoon sun.

The story Franco tells is that he'd like to spend the next 10 years managing in Japan, then 10 years managing in America, then three more years in a front office somewhere. At 80, he says, he'd be content to retire to a remote hillside somewhere, to grow his own food, make his own medicine and drink his matcha. The gap between that dream and this reality doesn't seem to matter to him. He's playing baseball.

The laws of the universe dictate that there will come a day when he takes his last at-bat. It might be next week. It might be a decade from now. But this much is certain: When it comes, he will coil up, like a viper in a jar, and he will smile and ask the pitcher: "Are you brave?"

### IN GOOD COMPANY

Franco is the oldest contributing position player in modern baseball history.\*



Homers Franco hit starting in age-44 season, a record. Carlton Fisk is second with four.

### MOST HITS AFTER 41\*\*

PETE ROSE	559
JULIO FRANCO	409
CARLTON FISK	403
SAM RICE	344
HONUS WAGNER	340

### MOST RBIs AFTER 41

CARLTON FISK	232
JULIO FRANCO	213
PETE ROSE	204
CARL YASTRZEMSKI	181
BARRY BONDS	143

### MOST HOMERS AFTER 41

BARRY BONDS	54
CARLTON FISK	53
RAUL IBANEZ	34
DAVE WINFIELD	33
DARRELL EVANS	33
CARL YASTRZEMSKI	33
JULIO FRANCO	32

\*Minimum 60 games  
\*\*Starting in age-41 season







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**THE ANCIENT SUMERIANS** figured it out: Gonna trade oxen? You're gonna need records. Thus were born the first written transactions and, presumably, the first hot take. ("The city of Eridu was smote by Akkad in the oxen trade of 2330 B.C. ... the abacus doth not lie!") In truth, there are no sports without transactions, and to prove the point we picked a date—March 2—to see how much one day of deals could impact this fall season. The answer: So much! It was the day the NFL offseason was set into motion when Dallas franchised Dez Bryant (so long, DeMarco Murray) and Denver tagged Demaryius Thomas (go long, Peyton Manning) ... the day Notre Dame introduced Boise State's offensive coordinator and altered the fates of the Broncos, Irish, Buckeyes and Seminoles ... and the day Jordan Leopold was traded to the Wild, thanks to a heartwarming letter penned by his daughter. Of course, six months later, Leopold's career is in limbo as he awaits his next move. But as the Sumerians knew, that's just how it goes with transactions: One man's players to be named later are another man's oxen.

What was so special about March 2—other than it being, of course, National Banana Cream Pie Day? [Seriously, look it up.] For Jeremy Maclin, Demaryius Thomas, Jason Pierre-Paul, DeMarco Murray, Dez Bryant, Ndamukong Suh and Justin Houston, it was the date they did, or did not, receive the franchise tag.







## THE TRANSACTIONS ISSUE

MARCH 2, 2015

DALLAS COWBOYS  
DESIGNATE WR  
DEZ BRYANT  
— AS THE —  
FRANCHISE PLAYER



\*\*\*\*\*

# TAG! YOU'RE NOT IT!

On March 2, the Cowboys staked their franchise tag on Dez Bryant rather than DeMarco Murray. Little did they know that this one move—in a momentous day of them—would upset the balance of power in the NFL.

BY DAVID FLEMING

09.28.2015 ESPN 55



# THE TRANSACTIONS ISSUE



# IN THE WORLD

of wedding planning, this had to be a first. On June 20, when DeMarco Murray married Heidi Mueller inside an intimate, luxurious, chiffon-draped banquet tent at the Four Seasons in Dallas, the NFL rushing champ had already endured the most eventful and exhausting offseason of his life, one that saw him leave the Cowboys and sign with the hated Eagles. And so it was that Murray, rather than celebrating amid one big happy Dallas football family, found himself constantly reversing field at the reception—from his new bride and their 2-year-old daughter, Savannah, to his old bosses, owner Jerry Jones and coach Jason Garrett, to former co-workers like Tony Romo and Jason Witten, and then to his newest teammate, Eagles





## Tag Drag

Since the NFL and its players negotiated a new CBA in 2011, the salary cap has increased by nearly 20 percent, and yet the average (nonexclusive) franchise player salary tag has gone up only 12 percent. What gives? Basically, the owners won the negotiations in a rout. Teams used to calculate tag rates by averaging the salaries of the top five players at each position from the year before. But under the new terms, the league takes a five-year average, then plugs that number into a complicated formula taking into account the cap figure. Bottom line: Tag salaries have stagnated—and even dropped for some positions. (The 2011 tag numbers were goosed a bit by the fact that 2010 was an uncapped year.) Here, the franchise figures for each position. —MINA KIMES

\*\*\*\*\*

### FRANCHISE TAG SALARIES

POSITION	2011	2015
QB	\$16.1M	\$18.5M
RB	\$9.6M	\$11M
WR	\$11.4M	\$12.8M
TE	\$7.3M	\$8.3M
OL	\$10.1M	\$12.9M
DE	\$13M	\$14.8M
DT	\$12.5M	\$11.2M
LB	\$10.1M	\$13.2M
CB	\$13.5M	\$13.1M
S	\$8.8M	\$9.6M
P/K	\$3.1M	\$4.1M

quarterback Sam Bradford. It could have been even more head-spinning had Dez Bryant, the wideout who'd benefited from all the stacked boxes against Murray, not reportedly been a no-show.

The unspoken tension in the room was this: Murray had carried the Cowboys to an NFC East title and their first playoff appearance in five years, inspiring Garrett to vow that the four-year veteran was now the "heartbeat" of the offense. Yet on March 2, when it came time to pick a cornerstone for the future, Dallas passed on Murray and placed its franchise tag on Bryant. That single choice, to invoke the tag—one of sports' most unique, and divisive, fiscal gimmicks—set in motion a wild chain of events that ultimately led to Murray's becoming the first running back in 68 years to switch teams after leading the league in rushing. It also shifted the balance of power in the NFL—and the seating chart at Murray's nuptials.

With training camp and the next chapter of the nasty Cowboys-Eagles rivalry looming, the dance floor was about the last place any of these players wanted to be in such tight proximity sans pads. So as Murray and Mueller gazed at their five-tier white wedding cake with gold fringe, the innocent bystanders say no one was sure exactly what to expect next.

In a word: awkward.

**THE FRANCHISE TAG** is the NFL's version of a promise ring, a token from teams that says, "We like you enough to make sure you can't date anyone else, at least for another year." And in the annual game of matchmaking that is free agency, the deadline for teams to put a ring on it can be the most significant day in a player's contractual life.

Dallas' one-two punch totaled 29 TDs in 2014 for the NFL's No. 5 scoring offense. Can Bryant and the Boys still thrive now that Murray is in Philadelphia?

Take this year's deadline of March 2, when the high-drama decisions—to tag or not to tag?—involved more than a dozen of the game's top names and prompted roster moves across the league that reverberated well into the summer. The Lions let defensive tackle Ndamukong Suh hit the open market rather than tag him at \$26.9 million, and he instantly landed in Miami, turning the Dolphins into playoff contenders. The shake-up in the AFC East continued when corner Darrelle Revis jetted back to New York largely because the Patriots prioritized cash and cap space by tagging Pro Bowl kicker Stephen Gostkowski (at \$4.59 million) and extending safety Devin McCourty (five years, \$47.5 million) before either could become a free agent. In the AFC West, the Chiefs took advantage of the Eagles' decision not to tag wide receiver Jeremy Maclin, who signed with Kansas City for five years and \$55 million, and also used their own tag as a placeholder until they could agree on a record-breaking six-year, \$101 million deal with linebacker Justin Houston, who led the league in sacks last season. The Giants were similarly hoping to secure a sack artist when they put aside \$14.8 million to tag

defensive end Jason Pierre-Paul. Then he, um, blew up contract talks and the Giants' salary cap plan, as well as his right index finger, in a fireworks accident on July 4. Pierre-Paul avoided signing the tag all summer, and as the Giants prepared to face Dallas in Week 1, the two sides were left at an impasse over his ability to play right away this season—and how much the Giants were on the hook for that \$14.8 million cap hit.

But the most prominent tag decisions happened in Dallas and Denver, where the Cowboys and Broncos, trying to navigate the inflated and volatile receiver market, franchised Bryant and Demaryius Thomas. It was fitting that the Broncos and GM John Elway were front and center on March 2. The tag was owner Pat Bowlen's brainchild, a negotiating tactic he cooked up during the 1993 offseason, when federal courts ordered the owners to finally allow real free agency. Bowlen was terrified by the idea of losing Elway, his future Hall of Fame quarterback, to the highest bidder, so he and the owners persuaded the NFLPA to agree to a provision that would allow each team to keep one free agent for an extra season. In return, that player would get a guaranteed one-year deal equal to either 120 percent of his previous year's cap number or the average salary of top-paid players at his position based on a complicated formula.

Back in the early 1990s, the tag seemed harmless enough, a way for owners to retain and reward their best player. But two decades later, owners have morphed it into a strategic stopgap, allowing them to hold a player captive, off the open market, while working to negotiate a long-term deal. Even if those negotiations fall through, owners can rest easy, knowing they have one of their top players for at least another year. And when that year is up? They can tag the player again if they so choose. Hence, players and agents have not-so-jokingly come up with a different moniker for the device: the Prison Tag.

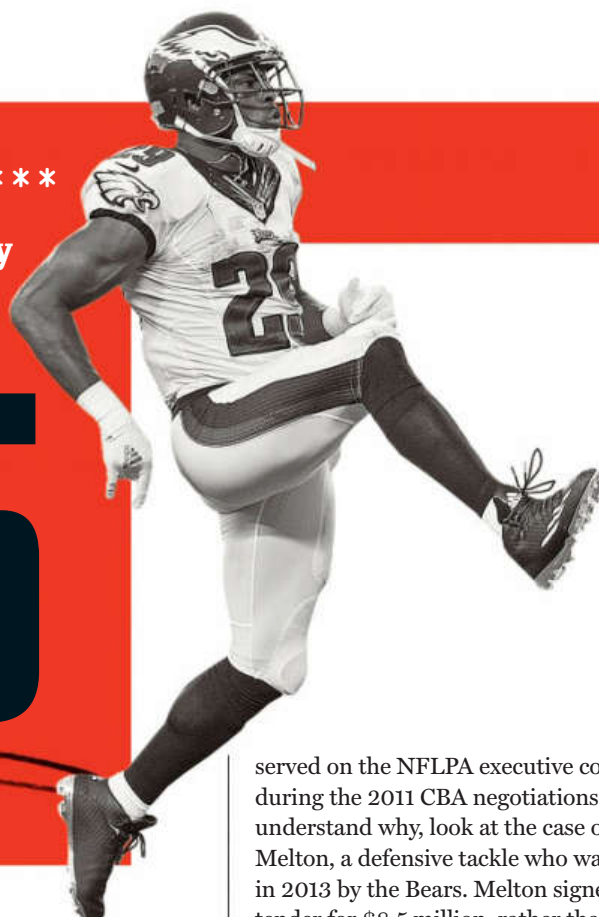


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## Should've Been a Cowboy

Last season Murray accounted for an NFL-best 35.5 percent of Dallas' total yards, the most by a Cowboy since Emmitt Smith (36.1) in '95.

# 35.5



That is exactly how Bryant and his agent, Tom Condon, viewed it on March 2, when Cowboys owner Jerry Jones and his son Stephen Jones, the team's VP, officially informed their two-time Pro Bowler that he was being tagged. Bryant, last year's leader in receiving touchdowns, was now staring at a one-year salary of \$12.8 million rather than a lucrative free agent contract driven by the open market. Another team still could have signed Bryant but would have had to surrender two first-round draft picks to Dallas as compensation—a price that no franchise has been willing to pay in the 22-year history of the tag.

And so the only leverage left for Bryant was to not sign the franchise tender, in hopes that Dallas and Condon would come up with a new deal before July 15. That's the deadline for tagged players to agree to a long-term contract or to sign the tag. If they fail to do either, the tag salary automatically kicks in. In the interim, to voice his displeasure, Bryant hinted that he might sit out all of OTAs and camp because, having not signed, he was not technically under Dallas' control and couldn't be fined.

"Everyone who isn't an owner is pretty much in agreement: The franchise tag sucks," says Scott Fujita, a former line-backer with the Saints and Browns who

served on the NFLPA executive committee during the 2011 CBA negotiations. To understand why, look at the case of Henry Melton, a defensive tackle who was tagged in 2013 by the Bears. Melton signed the tender for \$8.5 million, rather than work out a long-term deal, but tore his ACL three games into the season. Chicago didn't re-sign the damaged goods for 2014, forcing Melton to play out a one-year, \$5 million deal in Dallas. This season he is on a one-year contract with Tampa Bay for a base of \$3.75 million, less than half his worth just two seasons ago.

Sure, players have benefited from the tag: Former Seahawks All-Pro offensive tackle Walter Jones was franchised a record three consecutive times from 2002 to '04, missed the grind of camp every offseason and collected a cool \$17.9 million in the process. But in such a dangerous sport, players loathe the idea of earning their free agency bargaining power through performance and sustained health, only to have that leverage ripped away by the tag-wielding billionaires, leaving them little choice but to assume the game's injury and economic risks for one more season.

"This pisses players off more than anything," says ESPN's Louis Riddick, who spent 12 years in player personnel with the Redskins and Eagles. "They've bled for you, played injured for you and performed for you. All along you're telling them how you can't wait to take care of them, and then when it comes time to negotiate, you start talking about all the reasons you can't pay them."

Which is why Bryant threatened to sit



## Michelle Beadle took the #PulseOfTheNation and answered one lucky fan's question.

Will Tony Romo and the Cowboys ever get to the Super Bowl?  
—Roemello Villalobos via Instagram @roemello24

"Well, I don't have my crystal ball on me, so who knows! But I do know that Tony Romo has a bad track record of showing up to sporting events only to see his team lose. The Tony Romo curse is real. So based almost solely on that—and the fact that they lost DeMarco Murray—I'd say, no, Romo and the Cowboys will never get to the Super Bowl."

out regular-season games in protest, although that plan of recourse would have resulted in his being docked pay for every game missed. And per tag rules, if he didn't report by Week 10, he'd forfeit the entire \$14.8 million, as well as credit for an accrued season toward his pension. And remember: Dallas could slap the tag on him all over again in 2016. No wonder Bryant ended up agreeing to a five-year, \$70 million deal (\$45 million guaranteed) just before the July 15 deadline. "That's a big way to prove a point, by losing \$900,000 a game, so [a holdout] wasn't really a concern with Dez," says Stephen Jones. "A bigger concern was the distraction of him missing camp. When you feel like you have a good football team and you have a real shot, it's important to eliminate those kinds of distractions, enough for us to stretch a little bit and do more on the contract than maybe we thought we had to."

Jones says the Cowboys had originally been optimistic they could avoid a Catch-22 by getting a long-term deal done with Bryant before March 2, then tagging Murray, allowing the team to secure both. But last November, contract talks were put on hold when Bryant parted ways with agent Eugene Parker for Condon and the management team at Roc Nation. That left Bryant and Murray in limbo entering



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## COLD HARD FACTS

### Catching Up

Tagging Dez Bryant and letting DeMarco Murray walk were debatable moves by the Cowboys. But there is no doubt that Bryant has earned his keep through five seasons in Dallas.

# 56

Bryant started 2015 with 56 career TD catches, more than any other player over the past five seasons and fourth most in Cowboys history.

# 43.3

Bryant accounted for 43.3 percent of his team's receiving yards after contact in 2014, 7 percentage points more than No. 2 Le'Veon Bell of the Steelers.

# 381

Entering this season, Bryant had 381 receptions through his first 75 games, 72 more than Hall of Famer Michael Irvin had over his first 75.

\*\*\*\*\*

March 2. And so at 4:01 p.m., nearly half the league's GMs and coaches, like poker players waiting on the river, were glued to computers to confirm whom the Cowboys considered the face of their franchise. The very next day, knowing that Murray was about to hit free agency, Eagles coach Chip Kelly traded running back LeSean McCoy to the Bills. In what turned out to be an extra bargaining chip, he then shipped quarterback Nick Foles to the Rams for Bradford, the former No. 1 overall pick and Murray's close friend and roommate at Oklahoma.

As for Murray, after powering through a broken hand to rush for a franchise-best 1,845 yards, he'd hoped to relax until free agency opened on March 10 and wait for an offer from the Joneses in the range of \$8 million per season. His downhill style and the Cowboys' loaded offensive line had taken considerable pressure off a banged-up Romo and, more important, transformed the team's identity into that of a physical, dominant offensive machine. Dallas, however, was already concerned with its lopsided spending in 2014—\$52 million on offense versus \$32 million on defense—and the way it exposed the team in a 26-21 playoff loss to the Packers in which it allowed 416 yards. It also did extensive research and cost analysis on running backs and found numerous studies that portended a drop-off to come for a 392-carry, 27-year-old rusher. A recent ESPN Stats & Information study, for example, found that running backs suffer a nearly 40 percent drop in production between the ages of 27 and 30.

Rather than a big check—Dallas offered a fiscally responsible \$6 million a season with \$12 million guaranteed—the Joneses brought out their big guns, engaging in a technique one agent calls “hot boxing,” barraging Murray with attention and emotional appeals. Starting with the Pro Bowl, where Romo appeared panic-stricken when he saw Murray chatting with Colts quarterback Andrew Luck, the Cowboys' QB never seemed to leave

Murray's side. They went to the Super Bowl together and traveled to Duke to speak to coach Mike Krzyzewski, and on the eve of free agency, Romo pledged to take a pay cut for Murray. Jerry Jones lit up Murray's cell, and Garrett chewed his ear off at a Mavericks game. But they couldn't talk as loud as money could. “They were betting on that I love the city, love the fans, love my guys,” Murray told ESPN's Hannah Storm. “I told myself, if I did get to free agency, it was a high chance I wasn't returning.”

When free agency began, interest quickly rolled in from Tampa and Jacksonville, where fans erected a billboard begging Murray to become a Jag, as well as from the Raiders, who, according to a source close to Murray's family, offered a “groundbreaking” amount of money. All the while, a perfect storm was brewing in Philly. After the Cowboys decided against tagging Murray, Bradford called his college buddy to catch up on the free agent news and wedding plans. Before they hung up, almost in passing, Bradford asked, “Hey, think we can get a deal done with you here?”

“Why not?” Murray replied.

Within hours, Kelly was on the other end. They talked about Murray's north-south running style (which in Kelly's scheme should work better than McCoy's improvisations and penchant for looking for the home run seams rather than simply hitting the hole). They talked about Pro Bowl center Jason Kelce and the Eagles' loaded O-line. They were adamant about winning a ring—this season. By the time Murray mentioned his pregame ritual of hyper-hydrating with up to 240 ounces of water, Kelly, who is also a mad scientist with sports nutrition, must have already had his checkbook out. The next morning, on March 12, with Witten and other Cowboys still blowing up his phone, Murray was on a plane to Philadelphia, where he says he fell in love with the Eagles before signing a sweetheart five-year, \$42 million deal with \$21 million guaranteed—\$9 million more than Dallas had reportedly mustered.

When the news broke in Texas, fans started burning their No. 29 jerseys. Meanwhile, sensing that the Eagles had just soared over Dallas as the favorites in the NFC East with one move, Bryant texted Cowboys Hall of Famer Michael Irvin to ask, “What are we doing?”

An appropriate question, considering that the Cowboys' plan to replace last year's No. 1



# HARD-HITTING REFRESHMENT



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fantasy running back appears risky: The by-committee approach will feature Darren McFadden, a seven-year vet signed from the Raiders, 2013 fifth-round pick Joseph Randle and 2013 second-rounder Christine Michael, whom Dallas received in a trade with the Seahawks. The three combined for just 1,299 total yards in 2014, compared with Murray's 2,261 total yards. And if opponents are no longer forced to move an extra tackler into the box, they'll be free to blitz Romo or blanket Bryant.

"Dallas has to be looking at this situation and going, 'Oh boy, what did we do?'" says Riddick. "The Eagles weakened Dallas twice with this deal. It's not just what they added but what they subtracted from the Cowboys. Even if Murray gets hurt, Dallas still doesn't have him, so it's still a win."

To that, Stephen Jones says: "I don't know what the right words are with DeMarco, but I guess we're at peace with it."

**BEFORE THE CAKE** was cut and the Dallas-Philly tension dissipated into good-natured trash-talk, Murray's wedding day took one more unexpected turn: Cowboys fans attending another event at the Four Seasons wandered into his reception. Had the fans waited a few minutes, they might have gone undetected. But the rookie crashers entered right during the meal service, and with every seat occupied, they stuck out like Cowboys jerseys at Geno's.

Murray marched over and introduced himself. The crashers were admirers, they explained, going back to his college days at OU. The groom chuckled, turned toward his invited guests and yelled, "Hey, there's wedding crashers here! That's awesome!" Although he would be emphatically overruled by his wedding planner, Murray told them, "Sure, you guys can stay."

After all, no one knows better than Murray that feeling unwelcome in a room full of Cowboys can sometimes be the best thing that ever happens to you. ■

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## CAN THE UNION STRIKE BACK?

The NFLPA is on a winning streak, but it won't be easy to turn momentum into money.

BY MINA KIMES

The NFL Players Association has been on a roll lately: It's not only forced the reversal of a series of disciplinary cases—Tom Brady, Ray Rice, Adrian Peterson and Greg Hardy—it's also made Roger Goodell look foolish in the process. But that doesn't mean the union is in a better position to take on the dreaded franchise tag when the current collective bargaining agreement expires after the 2020 season. That's because when it comes to matters of money, the billionaire bosses still dominate.

As part of the last CBA in 2011, the owners actually increased their share of overall revenue. Before, players took in, on average, about 58 percent of net revenue, after the owners deducted expenses. Now the players get about 47 percent to 49 percent of net revenue. [The union counters that, under the new CBA, teams are required to pay out more in cash.]

Needless to say, removing something as significant as the franchise tag would require a major win in the next round of collective bargaining. And there are plenty of reasons the NFLPA and union head DeMaurice Smith find themselves in a weak negotiating position:

**LOSING RECORD** Plain and simple, few people believe the union could successfully strike. Every deal the NFLPA has forged has been haunted by the botched strike in 1987, which flopped for many reasons: The union didn't set aside funds for displaced workers, enough fans proved willing to watch scabs, and stars like Joe Montana and Lawrence Taylor crossed the picket line. "That right there broke the solidarity of their union," says Jeff Fannell, a former assistant general counsel for the MLB Players Association, which successfully struck in 1994.

**SHORT-TERM THINKING** The NFL's high player-turnover rate makes striking that much more difficult. "It's a union of about 1,800 people who have a limited earnings life span," says Chris Kluwe, a former punter for the Vikings. "If you hold out for a season and your career is three years long, that's 33 percent of your earnings." Meanwhile, the MLBPA, which is often exalted as a paradigm of labor success, has built-in advantages. There are fewer major leaguers, and they have longer careers on average [5.6 years, versus 3.5 in the NFL, according to the NFLPA].

**START AT THE TOP** Smith and Goodell have long had an acrimonious relationship. After the recent Brady decision, Smith was quick to take a shot: "We never make the mistake of trusting the league," he told a Comcast SportsNet outlet. Several sources—including lawyers, agents and former union staffers—suggested that Smith should exploit the NFLPA's recent successes by focusing on the union itself and building engagement to increase solidarity. When the last CBA was negotiated, players were confused, according to one former member of the NFLPA executive committee. "We were not all up to speed on the exact details or completely sure of what we had just agreed on," he says. "I remember thinking, 'What the hell did we just sign?' Some of us asked to slow down, to let us digest and understand the details ... and we were told to stand down." Meanwhile, Fannell says the MLBPA stresses education; hundreds of players typically attend its bargaining sessions.



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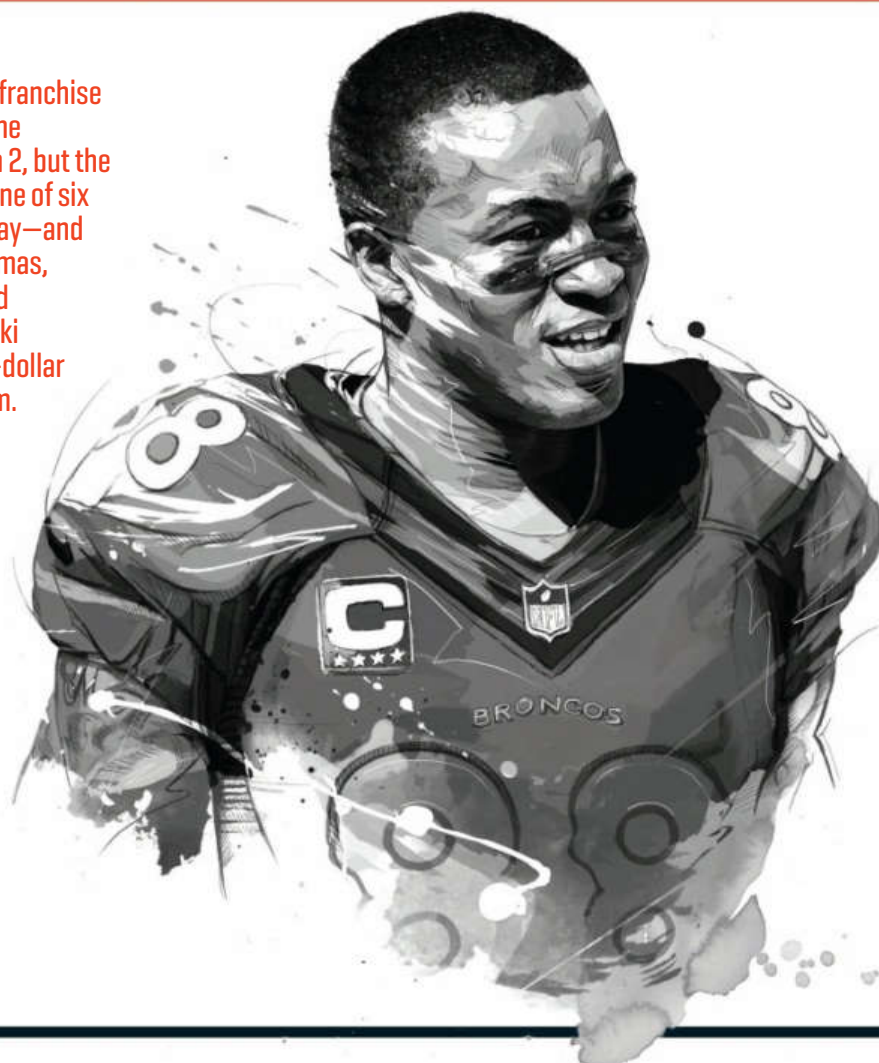
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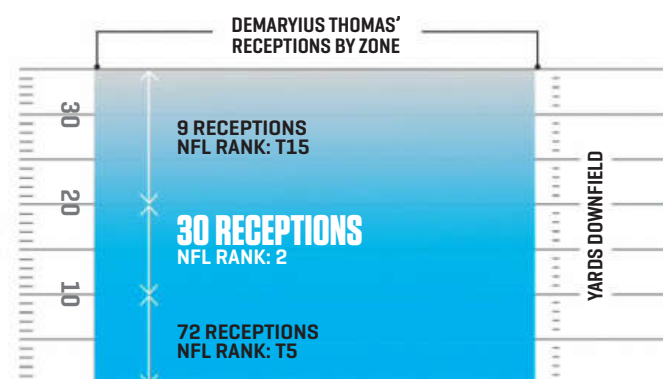
# FRANCHISE OPPORTUNITY

Sure, Dez Bryant's franchise tag drew most of the coverage on March 2, but the receiver was just one of six pros tagged that day—and for Demaryius Thomas, Justin Houston and Stephen Gostkowski especially, million-dollar questions still loom.



## IS DEMARYIUS THOMAS OUT OF PEYTON MANNING'S RANGE?

### THOMAS' STRENGTH VS. MANNING'S WEAKNESS



**WHAT DO 297** catches [No. 3 from 2012 through 2014], 4,483 receiving yards [No. 2] and 1,874 yards after the catch [No. 1] add up to? For Thomas, the total is \$70 million—a contract, signed on July 15, decreeing him one of the NFL's most valued targets.

But here's the catch: Even if he's worth the big bucks, the Manning-to-Thomas connection might not be.

Consider: Only three receivers racked up more yards on vertical passes (thrown 11-plus yards downfield) than Thomas last year (965), and his 30 grabs on medium-range lobbs (11-19 air yards) ranked second. Unfortunately for him, that's no longer Manning's sweet spot. Despite having Thomas as a target, Manning

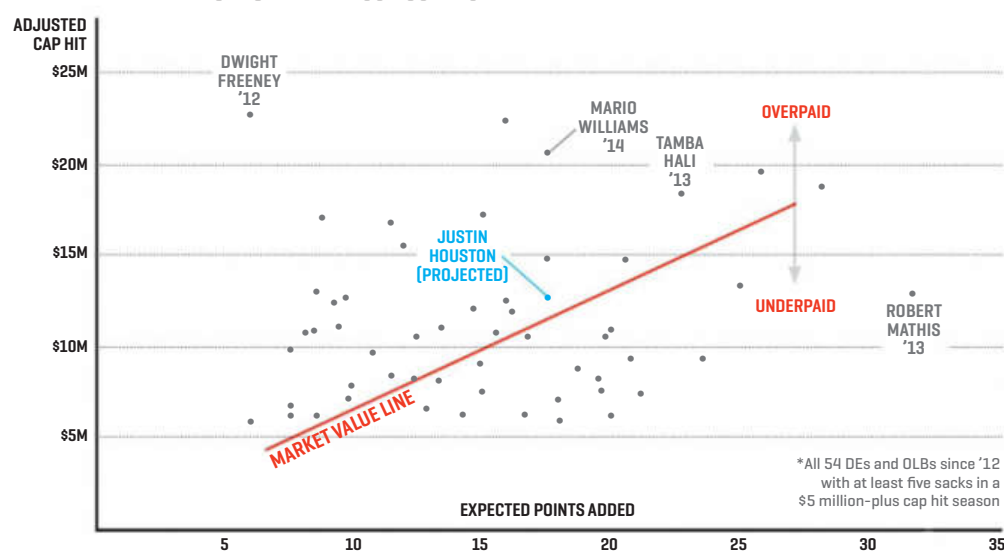
## IS JUSTIN HOUSTON REALLY WORTH \$101 MILLION?

**WHEN THE CHIEFS** inked Houston for \$101 million over six years on July 15, they made their QB tormentor the richest linebacker in NFL history. Sure, they paid a premium for the 26-year-old, after failing to extend his rookie deal prior to his 22-sack tear in 2014. But with OLB Tamba Hali turning 32 in November, the team was hell-bent on not losing the ascending pass rusher (44 total pressures in 2012, 59 in '13 and 85 in '14, per Pro Football Focus). Still, was Houston overpaid?

A market value threshold for elite pass rushers can be determined by comparing expected points added [a defender's impact on the net score for plays in which he was involved] to adjusted cap hit. That production vs. cost index reveals that, yes, Houston falls just a notch over the line. The Chiefs paid too much—but just barely.

Assuming cap inflation of 10 percent over the span of his contract, Houston will cost KC just over \$13 million a year in adjusted cap dollars. And in a 3-4 D that relies on disruptive OLBs, his three-year average of 18.6 EPA is worth (almost) every penny. —MIKE SANDO AND BRIAN BURKE

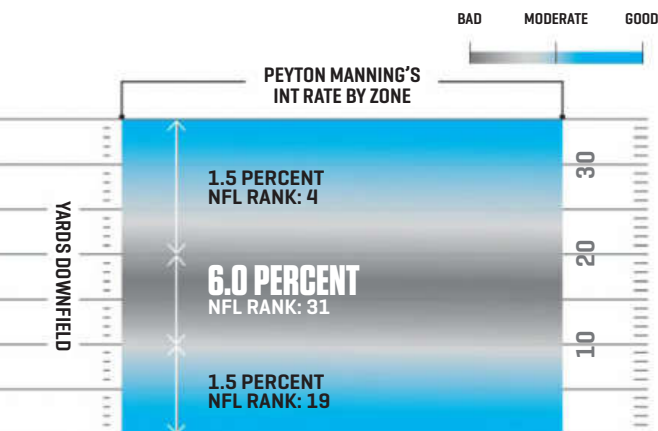
### MARKET VALUE FOR ELITE PASS RUSHERS\*



ILLUSTRATIONS BY YANN DANLON

FROM LEFT: RON CHENY/USA TODAY SPORTS; CHARLIE RIEDEL/AP IMAGES; GREG M. COOPER/USA TODAY SPORTS





struggled on medium-range throws: No. 17 in ypa (9.9), No. 21 in QBR (78.1) and dead last in INTs (8). And that last mark is why Manning, just two years after ranking fifth, finished 32nd in bad decision rate (4.5 percent)—how frequently a QB makes a mental error that leads to a turnover opportunity—on passes thrown 11 to 19 yards downfield. His seven bad decisions? Worst in the league.

The Broncos' brain trust—ahem, John Elway—is planning accordingly. New coach Gary Kubiak brings his ground-game-first attack to Denver, putting Manning under center more than ever before. And that sum? With Manning on a pitch count, Thomas' 100-plus-grabs potential will be all but a memory. —KC JOYNER



## WHY IN THE WORLD WOULD THE PATRIOTS FRANCHISE THEIR KICKER?

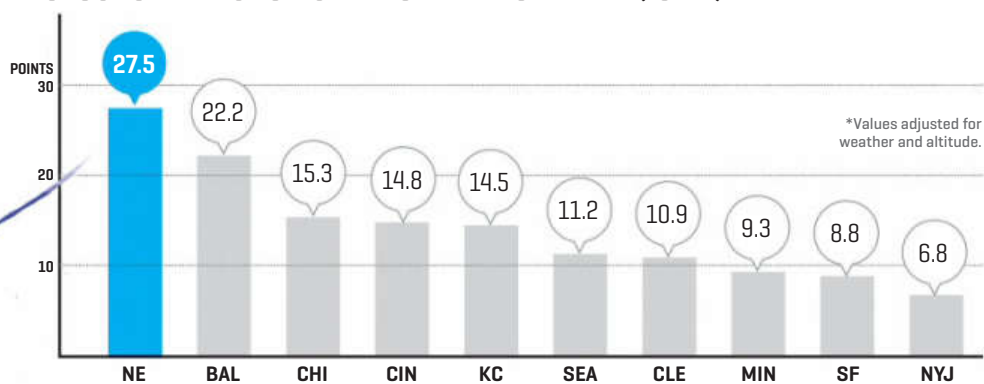
**THE PATRIOTS CALL** Devin McCourty the QB of the defense—and they all but dared him to leave on March 2. With the safety nearing free agency, New England instead franchised ... Stephen Gostkowski and then made him the NFL's highest-paid kicker (\$17.2M). Yes, a week later, McCourty spotted the Pats a family discount (\$47.5M over five years), but why even risk it in the first place?

Turns out, no team values special teams as much as New England or gets more value from them. The Patriots have franchised a kicker three times, most in the NFL. In 2006, they drafted Gostkowski in the

fourth round, making him one of just four kickers since '03 to go that high. And they're the lone team to draft a long-snapper since '09, doing so twice.

Elite special-teams play has followed suit. Points added over average—which assigns value to field position on kickoffs, punts and returns, plus the value of field goals based on distance—shows that the Pats have been above average each year since '96. And they've ranked in the top five since '11, with an NFL-best 27.5 points per year (7.6 from Gostkowski), nearly 25 percent more than No. 2 Baltimore (22.2). Now, *that's* special. —AARON SCHATZ

### VALUING SPECIAL TEAMS: POINTS ADDED OVER AVERAGE PER YEAR (2011-14)\*





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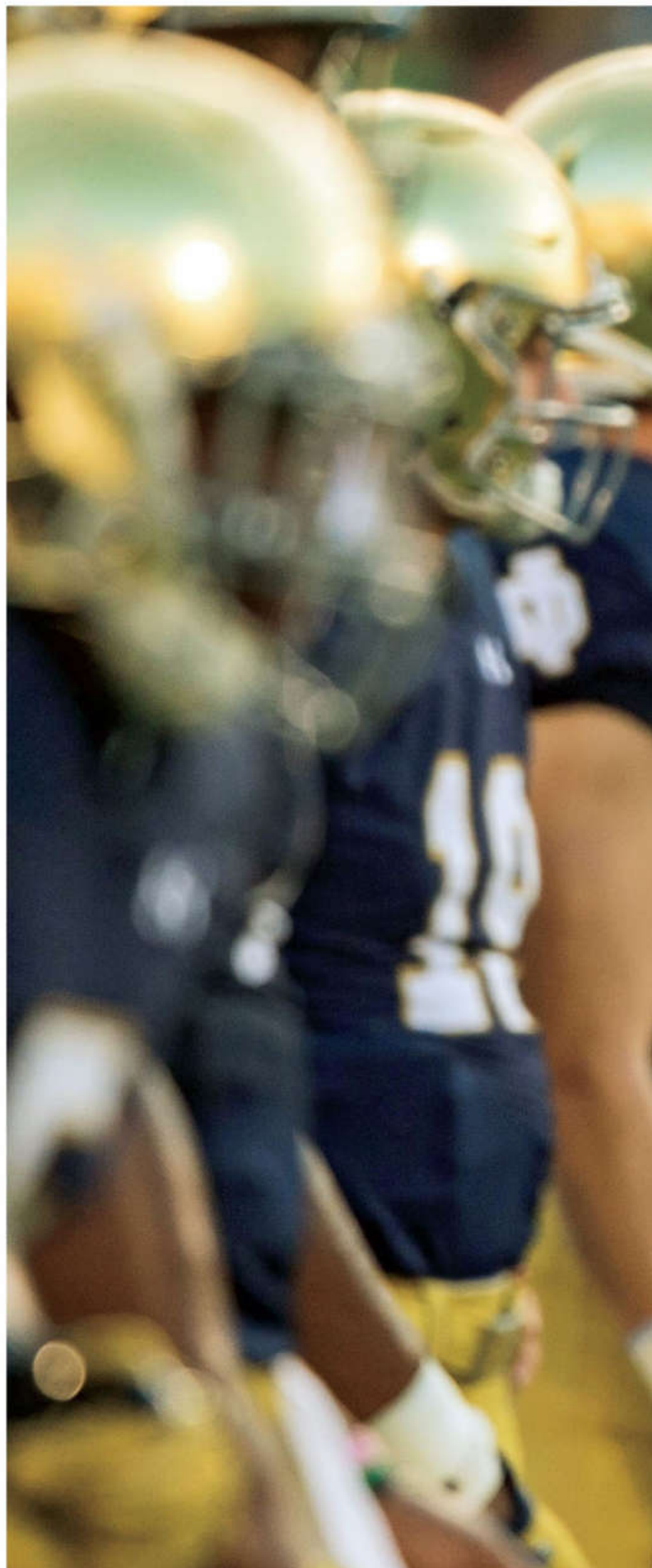
MARCH 2, 2015

NOTRE DAME  
OFFICIALLY NAMES  
MIKE SANFORD  
OFFENSIVE COORDINATOR

# A COACH'S DREAM

To wake up Notre Dame's tired offense, coach Brian Kelly hired 33-year-old coordinator Mike Sanford. But coming off just one season at Boise State, is he ready to be the QB whisperer new starter Malik Zaire needs?

BY WAYNE DREHS







## Sanford's quick climb up the coaching ladder

\*\*\*\*\*

### 2015

Notre Dame offensive coordinator

### 2014

Boise State offensive coordinator

### 2013

Stanford QB/WR coach, recruiting coordinator

### 2011-12

Stanford RB coach, recruiting coordinator

### 2010

Western Kentucky QB coach, passing game coordinator

### 2009

Yale TE/FB coach, recruiting coordinator

### 2007-08

Stanford offensive assistant

### 2005-06

UNLV graduate assistant





W

**WITH EACH STEP**, the crowd swells. Three, four and five deep they stand, dressed in blue and gold with blots of green. They line the sidewalks and rise up on their tiptoes to catch a glimpse of the Fighting Irish, moving en masse toward Notre Dame Stadium. It's the first Saturday in September. Week 1. And two hours from now, Notre Dame will host Texas under the lights, the first meeting between the college football blue bloods in 19 years.

In the middle of it all, guiding the Irish offense, will be Mike Sanford, the hottest young coordinator in the game. It was March 2 when head coach Brian Kelly officially introduced the 33-year-old he had hired away from Boise State to re-energize the playbook, improve the inconsistent quarterback play and help lead the program to its first national title in nearly three decades. Lucky for Kelly, the kid knows all too well the pressures of coaching in South Bend—his dad, also named Mike,



Players praise Sanford for his high-energy approach, and coaches value his ability to guide QBs like Zaire, whose 96.1 QBR vs. Texas was tops among passers facing a Power 5 team in Week 1.





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# THE TRANSACTIONS ISSUE

was the Irish quarterbacks coach in 1997 and '98. Young Mike, he was a ball boy. But until today, he had never even seen the Notre Dame players' walk, only heard about the pageantry from his father.

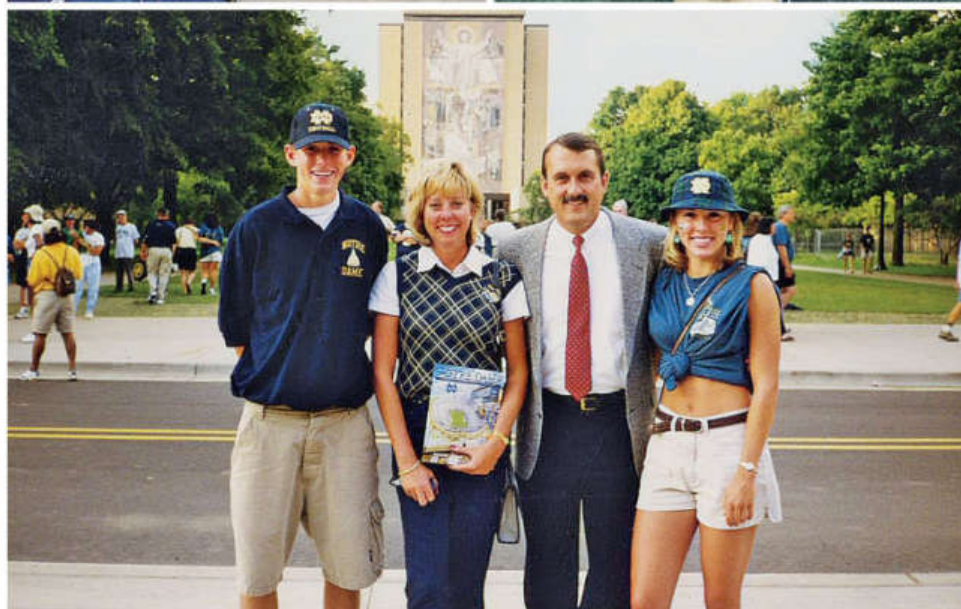
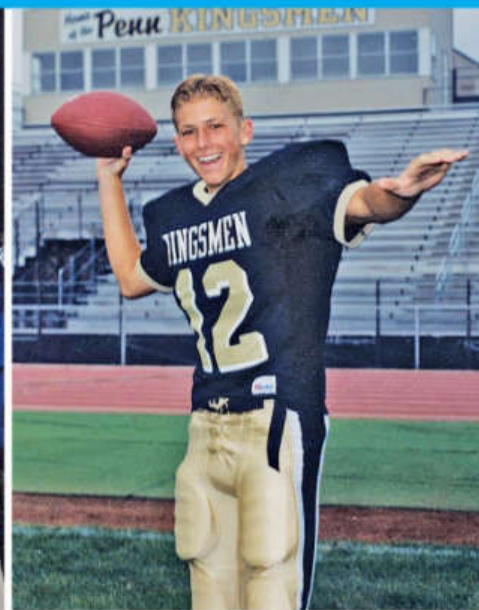
With cheers and the late-summer sun beating down on him, Sanford tries his best not to let his mind drift to the task ahead. He knows that this walk—from Hesburgh library past Touchdown Jesus to the stadium's Knute Rockne gate—is one to savor. But he also knows that somewhere down the line, another moving truck awaits. The only question is whether or not it will be his decision to leave town or someone else's.

The answer to that question, at least in the short term, walks just a few feet ahead of Sanford—starting quarterback Malik Zaire, heading toward just his second start at one of the most scrutinized positions in college football. The junior's first career start less than nine months ago ended with an MVP trophy, as he rushed for as many yards (96) as he passed for in a 31-28 Music City Bowl win over LSU.

In a much-publicized switch, Zaire had taken the job from redshirt senior Everett Golson. After leading ND to an undefeated 2012 regular season and the BCS title game, Golson sat out 2013 due to academic issues. Then he fell out of favor with Kelly following 22 turnovers in 2014, when he lost five of his last six starts.

As soon as Sanford arrived in March, he was tasked with not only overseeing a QB battle but teaching Zaire and reteaching Golson how to run an offense. The competition was too close to call after spring practice, but upon graduating in May, Golson bolted for Florida State before a winner could be declared. The bombshell transfer eliminated controversy yet amplified the need for Zaire to expand his run-heavy repertoire.

Sanford tossed every scenario he could at Zaire this summer, hoping to avoid any surprises against the Longhorns in front of a prime-time national TV audience. Zaire, who'd had a reputation for being an erratic practice player, couldn't afford to



get hyperfocused on one detail, like his dropback stride, and forget the rest. Sanford stressed treating the drills like a game. He harped on ball control, charting every turnover while sending Zaire and the other QBs through a gauntlet of teammates who would slap at their arms and hands. But most important, Sanford began to do what he does best: build a relationship with Zaire, become that reassuring voice in the quarterback's ear.

Four hours before kickoff, during the pregame meal, Sanford sensed that Zaire was tight. He asked the 20-year-old if he'd watched any games from the past

couple of days and what he thought of his fellow college QBs. "There are a lot of first-time quarterbacks," Zaire said. "It's been a struggle."

Sanford offered a challenge: "Let's show the country how the position is supposed to be played."

Zaire chuckled. "I'll do my best, Coach."

**A FEW DAYS** before Texas came to South Bend, Kelly stood behind the lectern at his weekly news conference and attempted to explain the effect Sanford has had on the program. For Kelly, the move was more than outside-the-box thinking. It was

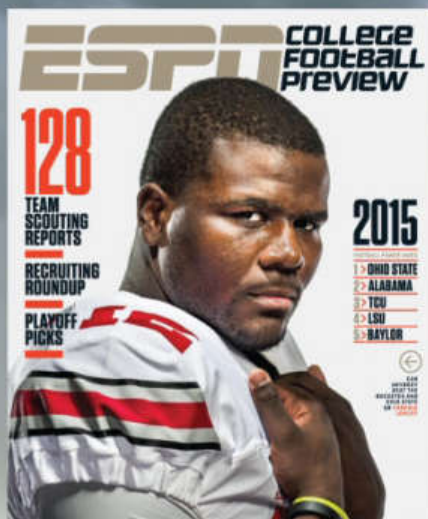
From warming up Harbaugh in San Diego to watching Dad groom QBs in South Bend (and being one himself), Sanford is a student of his father's game.



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THE MAGAZINE



unprecedented. In 25 years of head coaching, from Grand Valley State to Central Michigan to Cincinnati to Notre Dame, Kelly had never hired an offensive coordinator who hadn't worked with him previously. So why Sanford?

In one year as the offensive coordinator at Boise State, where he himself had been a backup QB, Sanford engineered the nation's No. 9 scoring offense and coached the nation's most accurate passer, senior Grant Hedrick (70.8 percent). The Broncos finished 12-2, culminating in a 38-30 Fiesta Bowl win over Arizona. After a single season as an FBS offensive coordinator, Sanford reportedly drew interest from Vanderbilt, Oregon State and even Urban Meyer at Ohio State. But Sanford didn't truly consider leaving Boise until Notre Dame called.

Sanford's bond with Kelly had been formed in early February, during a four-hour chalkboard session in the library of a cushy resort in Park City, Utah, where both men's families were coincidentally vacationing after signing day. They instantly hit it off in a skull session Sanford describes as intellectually stimulating. Kelly insisted that if Sanford came to South Bend, egos would not get in the way, that he, Sanford and associate head coach Mike Denbrock would collaborate to build the best offense in the country.

"It's natural when you run a system like I have for over 25 years that you become accustomed to doing things a certain way," Kelly said at the Texas game-week news conference. "When you get the question, 'Why do you do it that way?' then you have to answer honestly. That kind of turns it upside down a little bit. That's been good. It's been refreshing."

That the baby-faced Sanford is able to challenge Kelly's hard-line approach speaks to his strength at building relationships with coaches and players. Long before he even realized he wanted to follow in his father's footsteps, Sanford often tagged along to practices at USC, where his dad was wide receivers coach from 1989 to '96. It became perfectly normal for Sanford to play pickup hoops with Keyshawn Johnson. When his dad coached receivers for the Chargers from 1999 to 2001, it was Sanford's job to warm up QB Jim Harbaugh. He witnessed firsthand the importance of treating players firmly but

fairly and also learned how fleeting each coaching gig could be.

When Sanford was in fifth grade, with USC struggling to a 6-5-1 season, his Spanish teacher called his dad and mom,

on Monday, and I would get fiery with people. For them, it's just a game. For us, it's where we live. It's my dad's employment. I'm still that way. This isn't a fun little tailgate party. This is our life."



Melinda, to inform them that the stress was affecting their son in school.

"That was the hardest time for me in terms of being a kid in this profession," says Sanford. "If we lost, I'd get ridiculed

But perhaps the most difficult lesson Sanford learned—how to handle quarterback—came during his own playing days. As a junior at Penn High School, outside South Bend, he worked tirelessly to be



QB1. The job went to someone else. Instead of sulking, Sanford took the opportunity to better his game in practice and observe from the sidelines before returning to California when his dad was

Dan Hawkins anointed sophomore Jared Zabransky the starter.

"He was devastated," says his dad, who is now the head coach at Indiana State, three and a half hours south of ND. "But

headset, serving as a conduit between Zabransky and offensive coordinator Chris Petersen. "I've listed that season on my résumé as my first year of coaching," Sanford says. After earning a degree in political science and spending two years as a graduate assistant under his father at UNLV, Sanford received his first big break from a familiar face.

When Harbaugh was hired as the head coach at Stanford in 2006, Sanford borrowed money from his father to fly from Las Vegas to San Jose for the news conference in Palo Alto, planning to make a cold pitch. By pure coincidence, he sat next to Harbaugh on the flight. Before the plane even landed, Sanford had all but secured a spot as an offensive assistant. Following one-year stops as an assistant at Yale and Western Kentucky, Sanford returned to Stanford in 2011 under new head coach David Shaw, who hired him to coach running backs, promoting him to QBs after two seasons.

"He really understands staff dynamics and is very personable," says Shaw, who will face his former assistant when the Irish travel to Stanford the final week of the season. "I'm always going to root for him. Not necessarily when we play him. But he's a good person and a good friend."

Last season at Boise State, Sanford proved just how valuable he'd become. Five games into the season, after Hedrick threw four picks in a 28-14 loss to Air Force, Sanford and head coach Bryan Harsin warned the senior he was in danger of losing his job. As they left the closed-door meeting, Sanford patted his quarterback on the back. "He said, 'Let's go, man,'" says Hedrick. "It was something so small, but it just told me that he still believed in me. That simple pat—that's all it took." Hedrick threw only five more picks in nine straight wins.

The coaches who've been a part of Sanford's rise say there are no revolutionary schemes or never-before-seen trick plays. He has an innate talent for relating to his quarterbacks—and calling the perfect play at the perfect time.

But does that same uncanny decision-making apply to his latest career move? To leave behind his alma mater (and a potential chance to be Harsin's successor) after just one season for one of the most pressure-filled coordinator jobs in the country?



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hired by the Chargers. He played well enough as a senior at Los Alamitos High to sign with Boise State, where he was eventually passed over again as a senior in 2004, when then-head coach

he had seen through the course of my career those kinds of decisions. So we just encouraged him to be a great teammate."

Sanford spent most of the season holding a clipboard and wearing a



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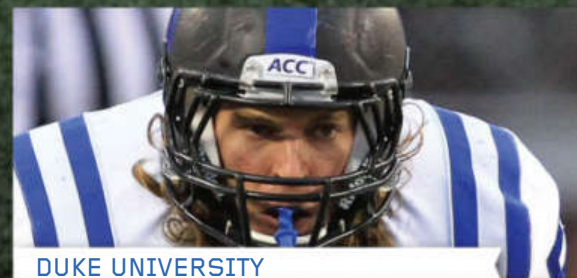
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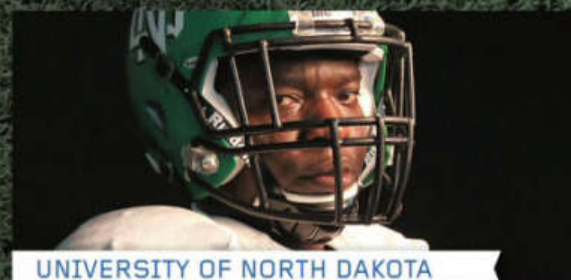
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DENISON UNIVERSITY  
**LUCAS ROMICK**



STONEHILL COLLEGE  
**NICK CHIOCCO**





**WITH LESS THAN** an hour until kickoff, Sanford can't stay still. During pregame warm-ups, he bounces from player to player, coach to coach, offering high-fives, bro hugs and slaps upside the helmet. When Zaire throws, Sanford follows every completion with three claps of approval. When center Nick Martin starts practicing snaps, Sanford jumps into a three-point stance and dares the 6-foot-4, 300-pound captain to take his best shot.

"Hit me!" Sanford yells. By now, the players are used to the limitless energy he brings to every practice, meal, meeting and now pregame warm-up.

"He's a riot," Martin says. "Huge fan. He makes the game fun—he's a reminder why we all play."

Says Zaire: "Him being the youthful, energetic, passionate coach really gets the locker room a lot more connected."

Finally, the real game begins, and the Irish get off to a quick start. Though his footwork and mechanics aren't perfect, Zaire misses on just two of his first 15 throws and finds seven different receivers.

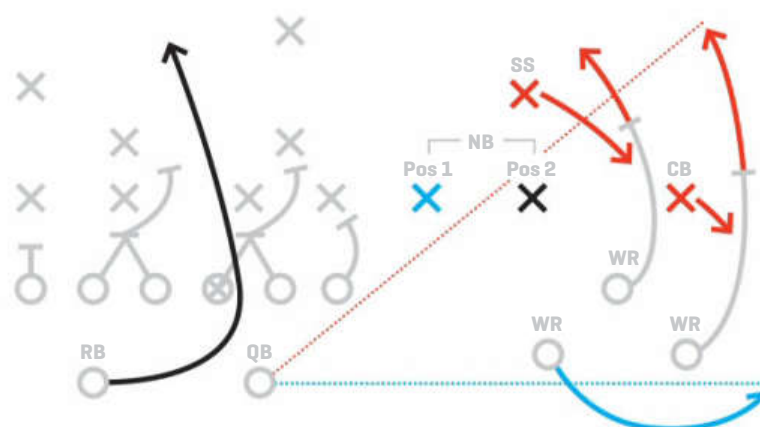
With six minutes left in the third quarter and Notre Dame up 17-3, he has the Longhorns on the ropes. On second and eight from their own 34, Zaire and the Irish line up in a run-heavy set with two tight ends. After four consecutive rushing plays, the plan is to show run but instead execute a play-action pass on a comeback route. Based on Zaire's film-study sessions with Sanford, the expectation is for Texas to stack eight men in the box. But as Zaire waits for the snap, he identifies a cover 2 shell. Wideout Will Fuller sees it too. Without saying a word, Zaire audibles. He fakes the handoff to freshman Josh Adams. He looks left. The strong safety follows. When the corner lets Fuller go, the free safety is out of position. Zaire reads his key and lofts a perfect pass to Fuller for a 66-yard touchdown.

Watching from the press box, Sanford can't help but smile. Zaire remained poised and adjusted on the fly. Sanford tells Kelly over the headset, "I absolutely, beyond a shadow of a doubt, did not cover

## Bubble Boys

The Irish offense struck gold [five TDs] against Texas in Week 1, so we turned to Longhorn Network analyst David Thomas to decipher the set Notre Dame used to rack up nearly 20 percent of its 527 yards: a bubble package that keys off the nickelback. Here's how it works.

\*\*\*\*\*



### BREAKING DOWN ND'S INSIDE ZONE RUN-BUBBLE PACKAGE

### VS. TEXAS

- ✕ If the nickelback cheats inside [Pos 1], QB Malik Zaire knows it's a numbers game: Just two defenders cover his three receivers bunched wide, so he throws the quick bubble. 2-FOR-2,  
29 YARDS
- ✕ But if the slot defender lines up wide [Pos 2], leaving a lighter box, Zaire hands off to his running back (likely target: C.J. Prosise, 4.9 ypc vs. Texas) to gash the middle. 3 CARRIES,  
36 YARDS,  
1 TOUCHDOWN
- ✕ Third option: Zaire pump-fakes to the bubble, luring the DBs to bite. Two receivers come off the ball slowly and feign blocks (a third sells the screen), taking off once the DBs trigger upfield. WR Will Fuller hauls in Zaire's pass over the top. 1-FOR-1,  
30 YARDS

that in a meeting at any time. That was all Malik and Will."

It is just one moment in a night of many for Zaire, who completes 19 of 22 for 313 yards and three touchdowns. His 86.4 percent completion rate is the second highest in school history. Zaire goes from a question mark to a Heisman candidate in one game, and Sanford's reputation as a QB whisperer grows louder.

Two hours later, just after midnight, his work complete, Zaire heads back through the Rockne gate. He's one of the last players to leave. No one is around, save for a man picking up garbage left behind from tailgaters.

"Great game tonight," the guy says. "Appreciate it," Zaire responds.

Then Zaire is asked by a lingering reporter about Sanford. How much of his success against Texas does he attribute to his new coach?

The quarterback smiles.

"I'm really glad Coach Sanford is here," he says. "He's a good guy to have on your team." ■



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# THE TRANSACTIONS ISSUE

# THE BUSIEST



On Dec. 18 and 19, in a furious attempt to go all-in on 2015 and turn the NL West upside down, newly hired Padres GM A.J. Preller completed an MLB-record 30 transactions in 24 hours over four trades, the waiver wire and a few bonus picks. So ... how'd that all work out?

BY DAN SZYMBORSKI

ADDITIONAL RESEARCH AND REPORTING BY BEN BRADLEY

## DODGERS/PADRES TRADE

We begin with the grand swap upon which the Padres' gambit relied, the acquisition of Matt Kemp (and most of his ginormous contract) for the team's starting catcher and two prospects. The trade hinged on three assumptions: that Kemp's .309/.365/.606 second half in 2014 meant the return of MVP-level Kemp; that his defense would be even adequate; and that Yasmani Grandal's sterling season was fool's gold. All of these assumptions proved wrong. Kemp's minus-13.1 UZR (ultimate zone rating) is worst among right fielders, he's hitting just .266—and Grandal was an All-Star. Whoops!

## WHAT THE PADRES GOT

PLAYER	CONTRACT	WAR	SAL. (M)
OF Matt Kemp	'15-19	6.7	\$107.0
C Tim Federowicz	'15-19	5.9	\$17.4
Cash			-\$32.0
<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>12.6</b>	<b>\$92.4</b>

## WHAT THEY GAVE UP

PLAYER	CONTRACT	WAR	SAL.
C Yasmani Grandal	'15-18	6.8	\$24.0
P Zach Eflin	'18-23	1.5	\$5.3
P Joe Wieland	'15-18	2.8	\$8.4
<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>11.1</b>	<b>\$37.7</b>

WAR and salary numbers projected using ZIPS; all stats through Sept. 3.

## A'S/PADRES

With Grandal gone, the Padres needed to upgrade behind the plate, and Derek Norris seemed a good bet, coming off an All-Star campaign in Oakland. But it hasn't gone so well a few hundred miles down the coast. Norris' BA, OPS and OBP have all dropped this year—his OPS by more than 60 points (making it nearly 30 points worse than Grandal's last year). And to get him—along with Seth Streich, who hasn't pitched since a 2014 shoulder injury in Class-A—the Padres thinned out their staff's future depth, sending away Jesse Hahn (3.35 ERA in 16 starts for Oakland in 2015) and reliever R.J. Alvarez.

## WHAT THE PADRES GOT

PLAYER	CONTRACT	WAR	SAL.
C Derek Norris	'15-18	7.5	\$26.8
P Seth Streich	'18-23	6.0	\$16.0
<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>13.5</b>	<b>\$42.8</b>

## WHAT THEY GAVE UP

PLAYER	CONTRACT	WAR	SAL.
P Jesse Hahn	'15-20	6.1	\$15.1
P R.J. Alvarez	'16-21	3.6	\$8.8
<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>9.7</b>	<b>\$23.9</b>



# 24 HOURS IN BASEBALL



**MARCH 2, 2015**

Atlanta Braves agree to terms with former Padres INF Jace Peterson on a one-year, \$507,500 contract.

## NATS/RAYS/PADRES

This is the blockbuster three-team trade that sealed the Padres' fate and happened so late in the day that half the transactions are labeled Dec. 18 and half Dec. 19. Wil Myers will be a Padre past 2016, which is a plus, but the team had to move a lot of its farm system to bring in the 2013 AL rookie of the year. And yes, he played well—in 35 games before a wrist injury. Curiously, by picking up Trea Turner [as a player to be named later, making him the 31st transaction!] and Joe Ross [a 1.07 WHIP this season], the Nationals appear to have won the Wil Myers trade—despite not trading or acquiring Myers.

## WHAT THE PADRES GOT

PLAYER	CONTRACT	WAR	SAL.
OF Wil Myers	'15-19	11.8	\$28.6
C Ryan Hanigan	'15-17	6.6	\$11.0
P Jose Castillo	'18-23	0.6	\$3.9
P Gerardo Reyes	'18-23	0.0	\$0.0
<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>19.0</b>	<b>\$43.5</b>

## WHAT THEY GAVE UP

PLAYER	CONTRACT	WAR	SAL.
P Joe Ross	'16-21	10.6	\$23.7
SS Trea Turner	'16-21	8.8	\$20.9
C Rene Rivera	'15-17	3.0	\$13.3
1B Jake Bauers	'18-23	0.0	\$0.0
P Burch Smith	'15-20	7.0	\$15.9
<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>29.4</b>	<b>\$73.8</b>

All incoming players from Rays; Ross and Turner to Nats, others to Rays.

## BRAVES/PADRES

Kemp, Myers and Justin Upton—what could go wrong? Well, for one, this final trade in the Padres' flurry meant that the team had to play a corner outfielder in center [a move that's cost them 13 runs, among the worst outfield totals in MLB] and pushed out talented veteran Seth Smith. Upton, at least, has contributed his typical above-average season at the plate. But by shipping off more of the organization's pitching depth [as well as Jace Peterson, who became the Braves' starting second baseman after he signed his contract in March] to get Upton as a one-year rental, the Padres paid a steep price that will only grow.

## WHAT THE PADRES GOT

PLAYER	CONTRACT	WAR	SAL.
OF Justin Upton	'15	3.2	\$14.5
P Aaron Northcraft	'15-20	4.7	\$11.1
<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>7.9</b>	<b>\$25.6</b>

## WHAT THEY GAVE UP

PLAYER	CONTRACT	WAR	SAL.
2B Jace Peterson	'15-20	2.8	\$4.8
OF Dustin Peterson	'18-23	0.0	\$0.0
OF Mallex Smith	'17-22	3.9	\$8.3
P Max Fried	'17-22	6.4	\$17.8
<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>13.1</b>	<b>\$30.9</b>

**KEEPING TRACK?** Add in transactions that moved Steven Souza Jr. and Travis Ott from the Nats to the Padres and then to the Rays, two international bonus compensations and Toronto's waiver claim of Juan Pablo Oramas and you've got 30 [phew!] moves in 24 hours.

## SO DID IT WORK?

In a word: no. The Padres have spent the season fighting for .500—and they damaged their future, with a farm system that went from middling to even worse.

# -10.3

DECREASE IN WAR

# \$38M

INCREASE IN SALARY



NHL TRADES ON MARCH 2

Boston Bruins  
Trade F Jared Knight to Minnesota Wild for  
F Zack Phillips

Pittsburgh Penguins  
Trade D Simon Despres to Anaheim Ducks for  
D Ben Lovejoy

Boston Bruins  
Trade F Jordan Caron, 2016 6th-round pick  
to Colorado Avalanche for F Max Talbot,  
F Paul Carey

St. Louis Blues  
Trade F Joakim Lindstrom, conditional  
2016 6th-round pick to Toronto Maple Leafs  
for F Olli Jokinen

MINNESOTA WILD  
Trade D Justin Falk, 2015 5th-round pick to  
Columbus Blue Jackets for D Jordan Leopold

Anaheim Ducks  
Trade F Rene Bourque, F Mikko Koskinen,  
2015 2nd-round pick to Columbus Blue Jackets  
for D James Wisniewski, 2015 3rd-round pick

New York Islanders  
Trade G Chad Johnson, 2016 conditional  
3rd-round pick to Buffalo Sabres for  
G Michal Neuvirth

Detroit Red Wings  
Trade conditional draft picks to New Jersey  
Devils for D Marek Zidlicky

Arizona Coyotes  
Trade D Mark Louis to New York Islanders for  
G David Leggio

New York Islanders  
Trade conditional 2017 7th-round draft pick  
to San Jose Sharks for F Tyler Kennedy

Colorado Avalanche  
Trade F Michael Sgarbossa, conditional 2015  
7th-round pick to Anaheim Ducks for D Mat Clark

New York Islanders  
Trade F Cory Conacher to Vancouver Canucks  
for F Dustin Jeffrey

San Jose Sharks  
Trade F Andrew Desjardins to Chicago  
Blackhawks for F Ben Smith, conditional  
2017 7th-round pick

Pittsburgh Penguins  
Trade D Robert Bortuzzo, 2016 7th-round pick  
to St. Louis Blues for D Ian Cole

Colorado Avalanche  
Trade D Karl Stollery to San Jose Sharks for  
F Freddie Hamilton

St. Louis Blues  
Trade F Maxim Letunov to Arizona Coyotes for  
D Zbynek Michalek, conditional draft pick

Montreal Canadiens  
Trade 2016 5th-round pick to Buffalo Sabres  
for F Brian Flynn

Montreal Canadiens  
Trade 2015 2nd-round pick, 2015 conditional  
5th-round pick to Edmonton Oilers for  
D Jeff Petry

Tampa Bay Lightning  
Trade D Radko Gudas, 2015 1st-round pick,  
2015 3rd-round pick to Philadelphia Flyers for  
D Braydon Coburn

Boston Bruins  
Trade 2015 2nd-round pick, 2016 2nd-round  
pick to Tampa Bay Lightning for F Brett Connolly

Minnesota Wild  
Trade 2017 2nd-round pick to Buffalo Sabres  
for F Chris Stewart

Vancouver Canucks  
Trade 2015 2nd-round pick to Calgary Flames  
for F Sven Baertschi

Toronto Maple Leafs  
Trade D Korbinian Holzer to Anaheim Ducks

# DEAR MINNESOTA WILD COACHES...

NHL journeyman Jordan Leopold enjoyed a surprise homecoming in March thanks to a moving letter from his oldest daughter, Jordyn. Now that his career is on hold? He's thrilled to take on more playing time for his other home team.

BY STEVE WULF

PHOTOGRAPHS BY ACKERMAN + GRUBER





# THE TRANSACTIONS BYLINE

A Leopold family sing-along: Jordan and Jamie with kids [from left] Brooke, Paisley, Kyle and Jordyn, the letter writer.



# IT WAS A LETTER THAT MADE PEOPLE READ BETWEEN THE LINES.

Jamie Leopold found it on the kitchen countertop in January. Written by her then-10-year-old daughter, Jordyn, on school notebook paper, it was a plea to the Minnesota Wild to ... well, you have to read it yourself:

*Dear Minnesota Wild Coaches,*

*My name is Jordyn Leopold. My Dad is Jordan Leopold one of the Columbus Blue Jackets defenseman. Well my Dad is very lonely without his family. We are living in Minnesota right now and I am lost without my dad and so is my Mom, my 2 sisters, and my brother. My Dad is on a team with young guys and is very lonely and is not playing because the Jackets got him because they needed a D man. It has been since November and we can not take it any more. Well to get to the point the Wild have not been winning games and you lovely coaches are most likly mad about that but your team need's some more D men so can you please, please, please ask the Jackets if you guys can get him!*

*Thanks*

*Love Jordyn Leopold :)*

Dad, you see, had been traded by St. Louis to the Blue Jackets just before Thanksgiving, so the holidays had been a mad scramble. After about a year of living in Missouri, following six moves in 12 years, Jordan's wife, Jamie, and the children returned to their home base north of Minneapolis. Meanwhile, the then-34-year-old father of four was trying to make the best of things with the seventh different team of his 12-season NHL career.

"It was a little crazy," Jamie says. "We were going home to Minneapolis to visit anyway, but we decided to stay rather than move to Columbus. We still had to get the kids settled in three different schools."

Jordyn's letter two months later was spurred by an assignment in school to write something persuasive. It was funny, sweet, heartfelt and, despite a few misspellings, very well-written. So Jamie posted it on her Facebook page. She also shared it with family friend Paul Allen, a sports talk host on KFAN FM radio. On his morning show the day of the March 2 NHL trade deadline, he trumpeted the letter.

Unbeknownst to the Leopolds, Wild general manager Chuck Fletcher had actually been talking to his Blue Jackets counterpart, Jarmo Kekalainen, about a trade for the hometown hero—"Leo" grew up in the Minneapolis suburb of Golden Valley, married his high school sweetheart, won a national title and the Hobey Baker Award at the University of Minnesota and played on the 2006 U.S. Olympic team in Turin, Italy.

So right before the 3 p.m. ET deadline, Fletcher did something "lovely," acquiring Leopold for 26-year-old defenseman Justin Falk and a fifth-round pick in the 2015 NHL draft. "It was about getting a left-handed defenseman with experience," Fletcher says. "But it was also about doing the right thing."

That night Mom and three of the kids—8-year-old Brooke, 6-year-old Kyle and 1-year-old Paisley—met Dad at the airport. "They picked me up with open arms," he said the next day. "I try not to get emotional, but it is. It's a great thing."

As they were hugging, the letter was going viral. Carson Daly read part of it on the *Today* show the next day. The house phone began ringing off the hook with media requests. When Leopold took the ice at the Xcel Energy Center that night, he got one of the biggest ovations of his career. About a week later, before a March 8 home game against Colorado, Jordyn was given the honor of saying the traditional "Let's play hockey," accompanied by both Paul Allen and her younger brother. She nailed it.

What made the letter so powerful was that it suddenly turned them—meaning those highly compensated, presumably pampered professional athletes—into everyday people with day-to-day juggling and night-to-night worrying. It showed that they too have people at home who need them. "My biggest concern," Jordan says, "was that people would react negatively and think a spoiled star was just complaining about his life. As it turned out, people understood."





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**“I AM LOST WITHOUT MY DAD  
AND SO IS MY MOM, MY 2  
SISTERS, AND MY BROTHER.  
WE CAN NOT TAKE IT ANY MORE.”**

And as it turned out, the Wild made the playoffs and beat Leopold's former team, the Blues, in the first round. Unfortunately, they had to meet eventual Stanley Cup champion Chicago in the second round. But Leopold played in nine of the 10 playoff games, the most since he played in 26 postseason games for Calgary in 2003-04.

It has been a noble career for the 35-year-old. He had 33 points to help

Calgary get into the 2004 Stanley Cup finals and 35 points for Buffalo in the 2010-11 season before he settled into a role as an experienced, heady defender. His presence in Minnesota at the end of the season was especially beneficial to defenseman Matt Dumba. The 21-year-old grew up in Calgary rooting for Leopold and the Flames, and he got such a kick out of playing with his former favorite that on the night of Leo's arrival, he scored two goals. They soon became a regular pairing on and off the ice.

“I called him Uncle Leo,” Dumba says. “He was a great guy, and our chemistry worked really well. He taught me all sorts of things

on the ice, how to read certain situations and react accordingly. And I loved chilling with his family, the home-cooked meals, playing ball hockey with Kyle. ... It always reminded me that I was exactly halfway between father and son—I'm 14 years older than Kyle, and Jordan is 14 years older than me. But he's also 35 going on 15.”

Even after the season, the two teamed up on the northern swing of the Minnesota Wild Road Tour, a public relations tour of smaller communities: Roseau, Crookston, Bemidji, Grand Rapids, Eveleth, Duluth. Nice places, but they're not exactly Las Vegas. That's where Jordan really wanted to be on June 24, to see Jordyn win the Social Media Moment of the Year Award at the annual NHL Awards show and present the General Manager of the Year Award with commissioner Gary Bettman.

Given all those good feelings, you might be surprised to learn that as the Wild and other clubs open training camp this month, Jordan Leopold is an unrestricted free agent. Because of the NHL salary cap, there are scores of veterans who made \$1 million or more last year and are now looking for teams, Leopold among them. Jordyn might be tempted to take pen in hand again to ask why that is, but the simple, hard fact is that the Wild have seven defensemen under contract on the roster and not a lot of room under the cap.

“It is what it is,” Leopold says. “I'm in shape, and I have a few more years left in me. If the situation is right, I'll consider it. But after Jamie helped me to chase my dream for so long, it's time for me to help her chase hers.”

That dream is Leopold's Mississippi Gardens, a wedding and events center in the northwest suburb of Brooklyn Park with beautiful views of the Mississippi River. They have transformed an abandoned restaurant into a spectacular venue with indoor and outdoor reception areas, a dining room with a dance floor, a full-service kitchen—and eight chandeliers assembled by Leopold. “First one took me seven hours,” he says. “I'm now down to three hours.”

It's opening this month, and they



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### The Give and the Take

Leopold's value to the Wild last spring transcended his time on the ice.

	Time on ice per game	Number of shifts per game	Power-play time on ice per game	Offensive zone start percentage*
Columbus	17:15	21.4	0:34	38.3%
Minnesota	13:19	17.7	0:01	50.4%

\*Percentage of non-neutral-zone faceoffs in offensive zone while player is on the ice.

MIKE WULF/CSM/LANDOV

already have 30 weddings booked, as well as the awards dinner for Jordan's old Robbinsdale Armstrong High hockey team. The Leopolds will also renew their vows there this month for their 13th wedding anniversary. "I've been spending a lot of my summer at Home Depot," Jordan says. "Go ahead, ask me where to find anything in the store."

The times have been wonderful but sometimes a little scary for the family. The worst moment came when Leopold was playing for the Penguins in Game 2 of a playoff series against the Senators in 2010. After taking a devastating hit, he lay motionless on the ice for more than a minute.

"Inside, I was freaking out," Jamie says, "but I knew I had to stay calm." *Stay calm* is something of a mantra for the wife of a hockey player.

Leopold recovered in time to play in Game 2 of the next series against the Canadiens. After that season, he signed with Buffalo as a free agent and had two very productive years. "That was one of our favorite places," Jamie says. "There were a lot of players with families, and four of us lived on the same block in Clarence, so we made some really good friends."

But then Jordan was traded to St. Louis in the middle of the





lockout-shortened 2012-13 season, and the family eventually came along. The uncertain life of an NHL journeyman can be hard—a “healthy scratch” is sometimes more painful than an injury, and Leopold had plenty of healthy scratches after the trade to Columbus. His return to Minneapolis wasn’t just about home; it was also about closing one door of disappointment and opening another door of opportunity.

So there’s a little irony to the main entrance of Leopold’s Mississippi Gardens. The doors have handles that are Plexiglas hockey sticks. It’s an acknowledgment of his popularity in the Twin Cities, of course, but also a bow to Jordan’s career and all of the exits and entrances.

Not to mention the madness of November, when the family was happily

settled in Missouri. “I was at the rink at 6:30 a.m., ducked outside at around 8 a.m. to cheer on Jordyn, who was running past the arena in a 5K, went back to work out at 9, did the pregame skate at 10:30 and then got told at 11:15 in the shower that I had been traded to the Blue Jackets—and that they wanted me on the ice in Columbus that night,” Jordan says.

“I caught a 1 p.m. flight—2 o’clock in Columbus, remember—and got there in time to change out of my jeans into my gear. Played pretty well, actually, because I had no time to think about it. The thing was, I had promised Kyle that I would be at his game the next morning, and a promise is a promise.


“After I talked with the media, I headed back to the airport, rented a car and drove the six hours back to St. Louis. Got home at 4:30 a.m., closed my eyes, watched him play and then we all went home and packed up my stuff. I got back on the road that evening, drove through an ice storm in Indiana that had stranded cars by the side of the road and checked in at midnight. Then went to practice Monday morning at 10:30.”

A few days later, Jordan moved into an apartment complex, did a little dumpster diving and bought himself a “Charlie Brown Christmas tree” that only reminded him of what he was

missing at home. So now you know why Jordyn wrote her letter in January.

And if you want to know why Jordan doesn’t want to do that to his family again, climb into his motorboat on a beautiful August evening with him and Jamie, the four kids and two close friends. The Leopold compound has a dock right on the Mississippi, and the destination is dinner in Anoka, five miles upriver at the confluence with the Rum River.

After a delightful dinner at Billy’s and a stop at Two Scoops for ice cream, everyone piles back aboard. Jordan lets Paisley honk the horn as the boat rejoins the Mississippi and the sun disappears. Look behind and you see a lovely wake attended to by a flock of ducks. But it’s what’s ahead that’s making everyone smile.

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## **The Downward Spiral** It was almost inevitable that Robert Griffin III would fail to live up to the hype. But maybe now, at his lowest point, he can find his true self.



efore LeBron James scored a single point in the NBA, he was already an 18-year-old multimillionaire, signing a \$90 million deal with Nike. James embodied a millennial template of success: money before accomplishment, celebrity before résumé, certainty of position without experience. It was the equivalent of striking gold before having discovered it.

In the river of his claim, James was the mother lode. He delivered the flakes, the rocks, the gold mine underneath—but he was also the exception. Robert Griffin III, in spectacular fashion, represents what happens when the water glitters but there is no gold.

Griffin's saga seems so obvious and foolish and predestined. The prospectors from his sponsors paid him and marketed him. ESPN took the lead in hyping him. The jerseys sold. Media and fans projected hopes of post-racialism and civil rights leadership on a person with no real history of social activism. Books were written on him. Griffin did the rest, absorbing it, believing it, referring to himself as if he were a peer with Tom Brady and Peyton Manning and Aaron Rodgers. "If you want to look at the good teams in this league and the great quarterbacks," Griffin said infamously after a loss in 2014, "the Peytons and the Aaron Rodgers, those guys don't play well if their guys don't play well. They don't." He played the most dangerous sport, the death sport, and still let the prospectors turn a devastating, career-altering ACL rehab into an ad campaign ("All in for Week 1").

Entering the new season, it's gone. Griffin is now a backup quarterback with immense jersey sales. He is also, for the first time as a pro, simply a young man stripped bare, fighting for a job, a reputation, a career, someone needing to prove that yesterday's success will translate into a successful tomorrow, someone hopefully respectful of just how hard it is to be a great player. Griffin entered the NFL as a fantasy, a marketing concoction: the leader who had never led NFL players, the elite quarterback who had never won a playoff game, the post-racial symbol for a place that didn't exist. The prospectors set him up, and he fell for their seduction.

The game has devoured him, and it is unlikely anyone will learn from his fall. The cautionary tales of Griffin, Genie Bouchard, Johnny Manziel and even the injury-cursed Derrick Rose won't stop the prospectors from selling the millennial template, nor will it stop the athletes—whose careers are short enough even if they don't suffer a debilitating

injury—from taking their money. But it feels as though it is also a good idea to avoid the seduction. If Griffin hadn't allowed his sponsors to sell both his arrival and his comeback, maybe he would have received more leniency, maybe his injuries and struggle would have generated more sympathy, and maybe the cruelty of his current position—having to face the world with the kryptonite of a bum leg—wouldn't feel so cruel.

There are very few like James who fulfill the Hall of Fame forecast, never get hurt, back up the hype, make good on the promise. The millennial template makes it harder than ever to be a superstar because the bona fides are no longer required for getting the money. Players don't have to win for the attention. They are staked a claim, advanced the dollars. When the future success doesn't come, as Griffin has proved, the fall can be too great, the mine shaft too deep. When young black athletes do not build bridges across the racial divide—whether promised by them, their families or handlers—and instead opt to be apolitical, they become inauthentic, questioned as "cornball brothers," as Griffin was three years ago on ESPN for not being what he never was. When the commercials hyping the comeback don't produce the comeback, the sponsors don't pay the price. Neither does the athlete's employer. Griffin does, blamed for reaching too high, promising too much, delivering too little.

Now there is only one path left for the former RG3, and that is redemption on his own terms. That could mean a solid NFL career, in which he becomes the next Jim Plunkett, the Heisman bust with the Super Bowl MVP second act. Or it might result in a redemption of a different sort: the recognition that the prospectors were never friends, and that striking real gold has nothing to do with money.



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